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Cover photo: Restoring the exterior of the Cincinnati Museum Center, Ohio, as part of the two-year renovation. Reopened 2018. Photo by Maria Dehne – Cincinnati Museum Center.

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Sharing Gallery Activities

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Keywords Experience; Gallery activities; Educator-resources; Collaboration; Museum education; Database

Abstract Museum education professionals agree that gallery activities are an essential part of a meaningful group experience in an art museum, yet there is no organized method for collecting and sharing these resources across institutions. This paper will give a brief argument for the value of gallery activities and present our prototypical collaborative gallery activity database. Our hope is that our model inspires the development of a larger scale solution accessible to all educators.

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Group Art Museum Experiences and the Importance of Gallery Activities

In the 1930s John Dewey began a conversation in *Art as Experience* about the importance of creating lasting memories and deep learning through museum “experiences.” For Dewey, experiences in the museum influence learners in the moment and support their future actions. Since then, educators have developed a variety of methods for creating successful group museum experiences.

Conversational techniques such as inquiry-based investigations and dialogic teaching are part of successful group museum experiences. There are more compelling ways to learn than through lecture and memorization. As Rebecca Herz shares in *Looking at Art in the Classroom: Art Investigations from the Guggenheim Museum*, “one of the goals of art

museum education is to engage visitors in experiences with art that are surprising and memorable... [as] individuals do not learn by memorizing a static body of knowledge.”¹ A non-lecture style of gallery teaching is exemplified by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine’s Visual Thinking Strategies, a system for using a set of questions to engage visitors in conversation in the galleries. And in *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*, Rika Burnham and Elliot Kai-Kei describe how to stimulate profound and focused discussions without the use of questions.

In addition to conversational techniques, gallery activities are imperative to successful group museum experiences. In the 1980s Susan Sternberg’s article “Art of Participation” put forward that visitors have more memorable experiences when they engage in activities, because multiple senses are used and learning modalities employed. In the early 2000s, Olga Hubbard wrote an article called “Activities in the Art Museum” in which she highlights the efficacy of activities, saying “strategies other than group conversations have casually come to be called activities in many museums...they change the dynamics of the interaction, they help enliven the museum visit and reach different types of learners.”² In Sharon Vatsky’s recently published book *Museum Gallery Activities, A Handbook*, she adds to the conversation the importance of addressing diverse modalities: “We all have comfort and discomfort areas and individual learning styles, but the addition of gallery activities [to a museum tour experience] can provide multiple ways to get everyone to participate in the process of connecting deeply with works of art...Gallery activities encourage us to flex aspects of our responsive abilities that are less utilized.”³

It is clear that scholars agree on the importance of gallery activities. But gallery activities are not one size fits all; they need to be pedagogically targeted. For example, an educator at The Noguchi Museum might have a goal of teaching abstraction to a high school group, with the objectives of building community and strengthening vocabulary. She might bring her students to the abstract sculpture, *Magic Ring* (figure 1). And a pedagogically targeted gallery activity might include having students listen to two instrumental songs around *Magic Ring* and decide which song best suits the piece. This gallery activity adeptly fits the goal of teaching abstraction: just like *Magic Ring* is abstract, so too is music. Using music also responds to the developmental stage of high school students, by guiding them to verbalize abstract ideas. The gallery activity also satisfies the goal of building community, since high school students are often shy at first, and music gives them time with their thoughts before they’re asked to open up verbally. The goals for the experience are complex and precisely targeted, so the choice of gallery activity must also be.



Figure 1: *Magic Ring*, 1970, Persian travertine.
©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

The Obstacles Around Using Activities

Gallery activities, which can certainly be adapted for classroom and other settings, are not easy to access. Currently, activities are largely shared among educators informally, through conversation, observation, and in-person professional development meetings. There is also some literature that features activities: individual museums have compiled pamphlets and resources of activities and occasional books and articles are published on the subject.

Educators new to the field have access to only a handful of activities from these disparate sources. It has taken us years to build toolkits of activities to use in the galleries. Early in our teaching, when we planned tours, we had to either use memorized activities that were poorly matched to the programmatic goals or develop activities from scratch. We often asked each other: do you remember that wonderful activity about _____? We still find colleagues lamenting about planning in isolation, reusing the same limited, and perhaps not always properly pedagogically targeted, activities.

We conducted a formal survey, asking fellow educators from dozens of institutions to find out if anyone had a better way of collecting activities. Colleagues reported using a hodgepodge of storage methods: keeping activities in their minds, collecting them digitally, and/or in hard copies, for example. Almost all surveyed used a unique method for sharing with colleagues.

The Value of a Gallery Activity Database

Activities are not one size fits all and thus we need a large database of them from which educators can carefully select. There is a need to provide all educators with access to a living collection of activities, from old favorites to innovations. We prototyped a database of gallery activities that includes titles of activities, procedures, themes, and materials. Using this model, any educator could easily find, understand, adapt, and use any activity. We believe this is a necessary solution to the problem of pedagogically targeted activity selection, and ultimately, a tool for educators to better serve their students.

The first iteration of our database was hosted on Google Docs, and then moved to Google Sheets, where we could add structure and organization to our growing roster of activities. We field test activities and add them into our database once we have used them and proved their value. We currently have 70 gallery activities (and counting). So far, we have shared the database with colleagues at a variety of museums, alumni and students of our graduate school, and classroom teachers who have participated in professional development sessions we have led. At this point, only we have edit access, and therefore only we can update the database to include new activities.

Our database, though currently rudimentary, makes it possible for us to select from a large number of activities and thus better meet the goals for each group visiting the museum. In the three years that we have been using the database to select activities more carefully, program evaluation feedback has become increasingly positive, reflecting that our programs are ever more engaging.

Feedback from collaborating classroom teachers and museum administrators and supervisors has acknowledged the diversification of our activities and in turn the more dynamic nature of our tours, or, as one teacher put it, “How effortless it was for the educators to capture the kids' attention.” Visiting classroom teachers have noted how activities play a strong role in meeting the needs of their students and goals for the trip. Evaluations have repeatedly presented activities as program highlights: “Writing the poem together in the gallery was awesome - both the process and the product were wonderful!”; “Tactile activities: creating portals, choosing objects to reflect on identity”; “Hands-on activity drawing art pieces.”⁴

Our museum colleagues have also noted their appreciation for our database. Often fellow educators ask where we find our activities. Those with whom we have shared the database have reported that they are now able to plan more efficiently, meet their goals more easily, and engage their students at a higher level.

Planning a Successful Group Art Museum Experience Using Our Rudimentary Database

How does our prototypical database work? At art museums, a 60-90 minute group experience generally consists of an introduction, three or four “stops,” and a reflection.

In planning, the educator

1. Considers overarching educator, museum and/or classroom teacher **goals** for the experience.
2. Chooses **artwork stops**.
3. Develops **conversational techniques** and **activities**.

The following is a sample plan for a group experience for fourth graders at The Noguchi Museum, with the theme of design. Of course, this kind of plan could be used in classrooms and other environments as well. Note the incorporation of activities in *italics*. This outline includes the aforementioned goals, artwork stops, conversational techniques and activities.

Goals:

- For students to be inspired by “design” (objects that are functional and aesthetic)
- For students to compare and contrast the concepts of art and design

Advanced Organizer:

- Give students a working definition of art and ask them for examples. Give students a working definition of design and ask them for examples.

Stop 1: Isamu Noguchi: *Chair for Martha Graham's Herodiade*, 1944 (figure 2, right).

- What do you notice?
- What changes did Noguchi make to a rectangular piece of wood to create this?
- Is this art or design?





Stop 2: Isamu Noguchi: *The View*, c. 1951 (figure 3, left).

-What do you notice?

-*Elements of design rating activity.*

-Are these art or design?

Stop 3: Isamu Noguchi: *Sentinel*, 1973 (figure 4, right).

-*Drawing: Artist's Choices Activity* with modification: how might you change this object to make it into a functional chair?

-Is this object art or design?



Reflection:

-How are objects of design very similar to art? How are they different?

To use our database to plan the experience above, we might search the term “design” within the database. Such a search would highlight several activities. We then select the most appropriate activities and customize them. Within the database, the activities we chose (mentioned above) would look like this:

Name of Activity	Procedures	Themes	Materials
Design word rating	<p>Go to an object.</p> <p>Write the words: color, form, line, texture, pattern on different cards.</p> <p>Hand each small group a stack of each of the words printed on a card/index card.</p> <p>Ask the participants to look at the work of art and put the words in order of which design element is most prevalent in the work of art.</p> <p>Facilitate a discussion about their choices.</p>	<p>design, color, form, line, texture, pattern, collaboration, discussion, debate, close-looking</p>	<p>4 or 5 sets of slips of paper with the 5 composition words written on them</p>

Drawing: artist's choices	Situate group in front of an object. Ask participants to sketch the object. Instruct participants to change their sketch of the object by saying, "How might you change this object?" or "What shapes or materials might you add if you were the artist?" Share.	imagination, drawing, design, identity, choice	pencils, paper, clipboards
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The Future of the Database

Google Sheets is not the right space for our database. Our goal is to make the database more accessible and dynamic. In order for the database to be successful on a broader scale, it must be hosted on a customized platform or app (both web-based and mobile) that can be accessed and added to by anyone looking to build an experience around art, artifacts, and objects.

To make it more dynamic, we imagine filtered searching, taggable uploads, and the ability to rate and review. We also imagine more extensive categories, through which users would be able to search and filter to find the best match based on developmental stages, abilities, themes, modalities, skills, and more. Yelp, Foursquare, or even Airbnb are potential models, featuring crowdsourced ideas, in which users can filter with high precision. For example, just as we can open Yelp and type in "Italian restaurants" and filter by location and wheelchair accessibility, in our proposed database we would be able to type in a tour theme ("colors") and filter for developmental stage ("grade 2"), skill ("empathy"), ability ("non-verbal") and more. True to these models, we would employ moderators to oversee postings.

When contributing an upload, it should be equally easy to tag based on the aforementioned criteria. After trying an activity, users should be able to rate it, making it easy to search by popularity and assess the success rate of an activity. And in reviewing activities, users should be able to explain modifications and adaptations they made, thus helping future users.

In these ways, the database would be more user-friendly and useful. A more highly trafficked database would provide a larger and more diverse pool of activities. Dynamic filtering of activities would allow users to choose ideal activities to meet the unique needs of their group. Using activities chosen precisely from a large pool would enable deep connections to objects, making museum experiences and object-based learning in all settings more responsive and memorable. We imagine that Google Arts & Culture might take this on as a project, or a private developer might build an app, a subscription for which could be purchased by museums or schools for their educators.

We know that educators, parents, teachers, and museum staff use activities to bring objects to life. We believe that all people would benefit from having access to a large and diverse collection of activities with which to create more powerful experiences that expand interpretations, imaginations, and capacities.

Collaborate with Us!

Follow this link to mine our database for activities: bit.ly/GalleryActivities. We also invite you to contribute your ideas and feedback by reaching out to us: museumactivities@gmail.com.

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Figure 1: *Magic Ring*, 1970, Persian travertine. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

Figure 2: *Chair for Martha Graham's 'Hérodiade,'* 1944, plywood, paint. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, NY/ARS. Photo by Kevin Noble.

Figure 3: *The View*, c. 1951, plastic, metal. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, NY.

Figure 4: *Sentinel*, 1973, disc-sanded stainless steel, 71 3/8 x 70 1/2 x 28 5/8 in. (181.3 x 179.1 x 72.7 cm). ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, NY.

Notes

¹Rebecca Shulman Herz and Grant Wiggins, *Looking at Art in the Classroom: Art Investigations from the Guggenheim Museum*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010), 1.

² Olga M Hubard, "Activities in the Art Museum," NAEA Advisory (Fall 2006), 1.

³ Sharon Vatsky, *Museum Gallery Activities, A Handbook*, (Maryland: American Alliance of Museums, 2018) xiii-xiv.

⁴ *The Noguchi Museum Group Tour Evaluations*.

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