

Promoting inclusion - how museums can educate mass audiences

As Melbourne becomes increasingly diverse and multicultural, museums must adapt to meet the different needs of their constituencies by re-thinking their education and interpretation practices. Purnima Ruanglertbutr, education officer at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, details her experiences.

To ensure long-term sustainability and relevance, art museums must actively broaden their public and educational programming to audiences that may not usually visit the art museum.

As the education officer for the Basil Sellers Art Prize 2012 exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, I have devised a suite of education programs that respond to our community and education needs. This involves being acutely aware of, and meeting the demands of, varying social groups by creating 'tailor-made' education programs that fosters an inclusive environment.

Typically, museum educators make art objects significant to the viewer by forming connections between artworks, museum exhibits and the lives of viewers. When devising the education programs for the Basil Sellers Art Prize 2012, the preliminary question that I asked myself was – how could the programs remain meaningful, not solely amongst regular school visitors, but also amongst education audiences who are non-visitors? The answer was to diverge away from developing traditional generic programs that view audiences as homogenous.

Interdisciplinary-based learning is integral to the Basil Sellers Art Prize 2012 education programs, demonstrating strong connections between art, other subject disciplines, and the development of literacy and cognitive skills used to master subjects such as reading and writing. Fuelled by the increasing number of schoolteachers who recognise the advantages of bringing students to galleries to respond to authentic artworks, a range of English, English as a Second Language (ESL) and Sport programs have been developed.

ESL students are often infrequent visitors of Australian museums, have low to intermediate English language proficiency, little knowledge of the socio-cultural behaviour expected in museums, and often lack the language required to discuss and engage about artwork meanings. Whilst the students are completing courses that have no direct relevance to art, the education programs are tailored to offer students insight into Australian culture, art, issues of settlement, and teach vocabulary about art and sport using original artworks. Students develop visual literacy skills by producing responses to artworks in the exhibition and by expressing ideas through spoken and written language.

The challenge in attaining such audiences lies in removing the many barriers to participation. It is essential to recognize the instrumentality of museum education as not only that which is able to attract and guide visitors into productive inquiry, but also to promote equality of opportunity in learning.

Students are offered a complete learning experience that begins and ends in the classroom. Pre-visit resources with reading, listening, speaking and writing activities about the Potter, the Basil Sellers Art Prize and the terminology required to engage in the program, are offered to ESL teachers upon booking a program to prepare students for their visit. Questioning strategies and language activities are employed during the visit, encouraging students to view the museum as a place for social experiences and critical exchange.

Teachers who partake in our programs are encouraged to submit selected student writing and artwork produced in response to the exhibition for representation on the Potter website. By enabling students to become the creators of content, students are becoming aware of how language is produced and used in museum environments.



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Much of this inclusiveness is prompted by the educator and the institution having to be open to an internal change to make an external difference. As an educator with Thai and Indian cultural heritage, I am representative of the pluralistic society in which we reside; I am able to employ my own cultural background, including experiences in working with students from English and non-English speaking backgrounds, to better cater for student needs and foster social cohesion. Logic dictates there should be more educators from diverse cultural backgrounds delivering such programs and influencing future museum programming.

The [Basil Sellers Art Prize \(BSAP\) education programs](http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/education/basil-sellers-art-prize/) are innovative, challenging and relevant educational sessions for students and teachers. They are held at the [Ian Potter Museum of Art](http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/) and are led by an educator. The BSAP education programs provide breadth and depth in learning across diverse discipline areas, aiming to draw clear links to curriculum, inspire new questions and to educate through art.

To book an education program, please contact Purnima by phone (0401 162 987) or email (purnima.r@unimelb.edu.au)



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