

2016-2017

Teacher Think Tank

What is the role of themes in schools and museums? Why do classroom and museum educators choose particular themes? When are non-themed tours, or particular themes more successful?



"The more thoughtful we are in our selection of themes, the more significant our students' experiences with art are likely to be."

Olga Hubbard (2015). *Art Museum Education: Facilitating Gallery Experiences*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Introduction:

During the 2016/17 Noguchi Museum Teacher Think Tank, a group of school and museum educators gathered to discuss the integration of themes in their practice. We worked with Olga Hubbard, Associate Professor of Art Education at Teachers College, to guide our inquiries. In our early conversations, we discussed how themes were often chosen based on the teacher, and their interests or knowledge base. We agreed that the success of a theme was dependent upon a teacher's comfort and research into that theme. We also agreed that a completely unbiased approach to themes isn't possible for the school or museum educator, but the care that goes into choosing the theme is of utmost importance. We discussed how we often choose themes based on the specific qualities of an artwork, such as their unique textures, forms, and colors with complex references; or we might choose a theme based on our direct experience with that work of art.

Our conversations often returned to the debate around needing a theme, or not needing a theme. Professor Hubbard took it one step further and challenged us to consider how we might let go of the need for specific outcomes while teaching with art. She invited us to reconsider our objectives in art education and how we might rely on what art truly does for us as human beings; how art makes us curious, it grabs us by its beauty, it connects us, ignites powerful emotional reactions, validates our stories, changes our perceptions, and more.

After a number of group discussions, we individually chose research questions to explore in our respective schools and museums. We collaborated with our students, evaluated our approaches, and analyzed the data we collected to discover personal and meaningful conclusions. Most often in the Think Tank, our research projects have implications for our own practice. We occasionally gather our resources and create reports about our findings, but find that some themes, especially the theme of themes, to be quite personal. Below you will find a sample of our work in the form of art, graphs, stories and charts from a number of our research projects.

If you have you any questions, or would like to talk more about the Teacher Think Tank, please contact us at education@noguchi.org.

Think Tank Member: Megan Pahmier

Research Question: How do students conceptualize a theme, if it is never explicitly stated?



What we did: Students explored their own commitments by writing several poems about themselves and what was most important in their lives. They used imagery from the poems to create symbols that represented these commitments. We turned the symbols into stamps that were printed on fabric and then the prints were sewn onto “personal flags.” The flags were designed using a shibori technique and dyed with indigo. Finally, the students learned embroidery techniques to add the final details. This project was designed to give students the experience of working on something over time, committing to difficult processes and seeing the result. Representing commitments and experiencing them through art making.

Data: I gathered data through the use of written reflection questions and oral group interviews.

My Questions: Tell me about your experience in LTA this year. (How did you feel? What did you make? What do you remember?) What was the theme this year? If you could choose a theme for next year, what would it be and why? **or** would you choose to have no theme and why?

Tell me about your experience in LTA:

“The experience of LTA was...all the words that describe amazing! I say this because everytime Guggenheim comes I feel happy because those are the best moments of my class.”

“One of the best moments was making the poems about ourselves.”

“I got to draw and design great things! I GOT TO DRAW IN MY VERY OWN SKETCHBOOK!!!”

“We did some really fun activities, some ominous and some silly. We made a lot of art and learned terms like foreground and background”

“It was a way for me to escape all of my troubles and just learn through art.”

“I felt inspired and I was inspired by others.”

"It was not exactly a good experience. I think there should be more freedom of choice next year."

"I felt good trying out new things like sewing, printing, and patterns with rubber bands and natural dyes. I hated when I messed up sewing and had to start over again but I still loved LTA."

"I mean, who can complain with a personal stamp and personal flag?"

What was the theme of LTA this year?

"I believe the theme this year was yourself and self representation. I think this because we made things to show who we are."

"I think the theme was to find out who you were as a person by making art." 10X

"The theme this year was hard work because the sewing was hard work." 5X

"I have no idea." 3X

"I think the theme this year was to never give up on art."

"Layers!"

"Respecting others because that is what we did and working in teams." 3x

"To learn who you are on the inside."

If you could choose a theme for next year what would it be and why? Or would you choose to have no theme and why?

"I think that everyone could have their own theme connected to their uniqueness. It would be special and new and well liked!"

"If I could choose it would be sewing because I like sewing."

"For next year I would choose no theme because I just want to try new things again."

"I would choose no theme so that the range of our art can be more broad and we can make abstract art." 10x

"I would like the theme of friendships next year so I could learn more about my friends." 2x

"I would choose the theme to revolve around someone you love and show how you love them in an art form."

"I would like to focus a little more on painting and learning how to draw things."

"We could vote on what the theme would be."

Results/Reflection:

It was clear to me after this reflection that most of my students had enjoyed LTA whether or not they felt like they knew the implicit theme, although most of them also expressed feelings of freedom and expression in LTA (which was part of the implied theme?)

Most students got a sense that the theme was related to finding out who they were as artists and finding different ways to express that. They used different words like "personality," "personal interests," "who we are," etc to express what I intended through the word "commitment." Only a few acknowledged hard work and returning again and again to an artwork as intended themes.

The majority, when given the choice, choose not to have a theme because they felt like a theme would be too restricting on their art (whether through the medium and/or content.)

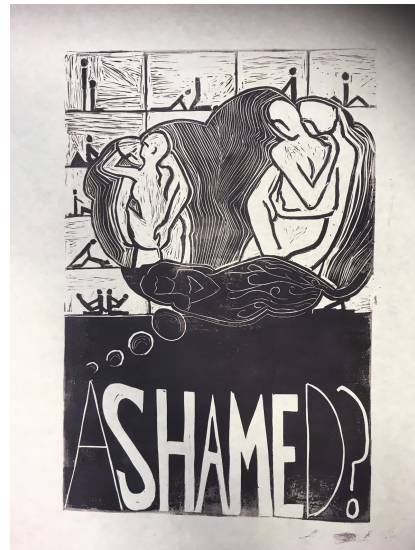
Think Tank Member: Nurit Newman

Research Question: In which type of art lesson do students feel more connected and supported by their teacher; themed or non-themed lessons?

What I learned about non-themed lessons:

At my school, my 11th grade students, who knew what they wanted to make, were engaged in their project, but not always open to teacher interaction or suggestions. Student who didn't know what they wanted to make requested more teacher interaction and were almost asking for a theme to help them get started. My 10th grade students who were working on theme based projects were so immersed in the process that they came into the studio after school to work on their Protest Posters and Heritage Tiles. Students were more open to teacher interaction and suggestions.

Sample student art from Protest Poster project:



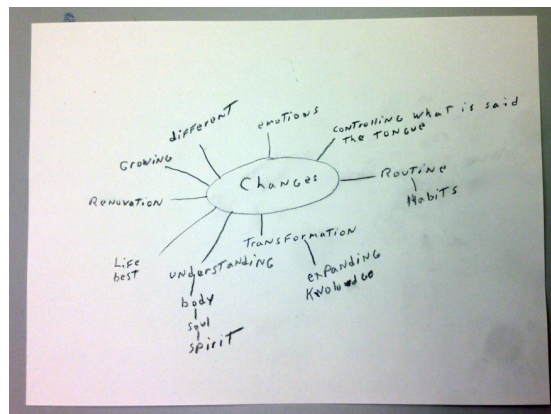
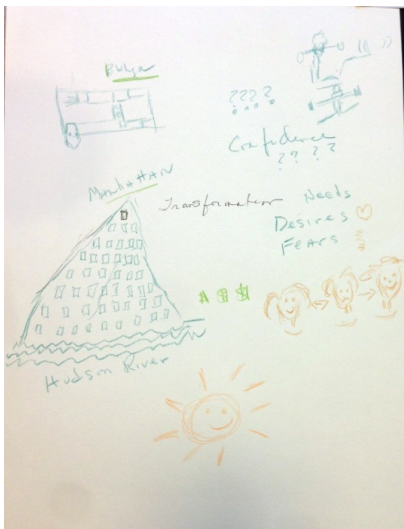
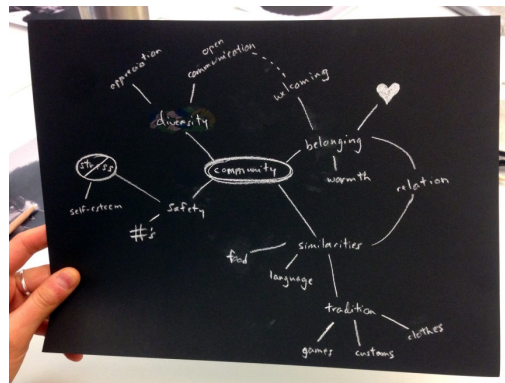
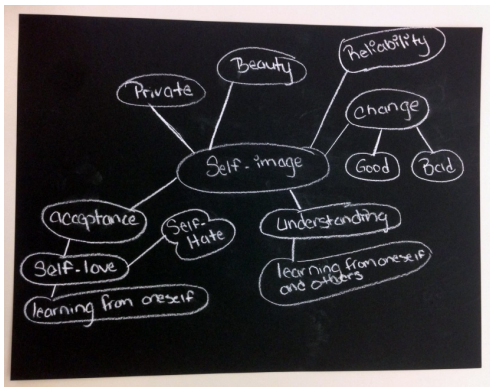
Conclusion: Students seem more connected and allow themselves to be supported more often by their teacher with theme based projects. I've gone to the other side. I'm now a believer in themed-based projects. *But only if projects are based on the individual student's experience.*

Think Tank Member: Anne Spurgeon

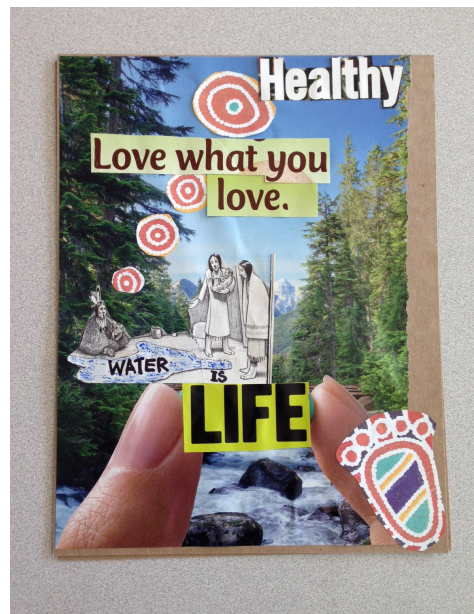
Research Question: How might a theme or big idea be representative of one's self?

Project: In a three-part program through the Museum of Modern Art, which included a pre-visit, museum visit, and post-visit, adult students from a human services organization began their project by closely looking at and discussing works of art from MoMA's collection featured in the *Unfinished Conversations: New Work from the Collection* exhibition.

Students created mind maps to motivate the project:



And then final collages:



Participant Reflections:

"...I believe this kind of work serves as an analysis of my internal feelings while creating this kind of progressive start to finish concept with the collages..."

- (participant)

"I actually learned a lot about my tenants/clients, as they felt very comfortable sharing their own histories, their own opinions, and their own work. Each client had a very unique story to tell which they were able to express either through discussion, or visually through an art-making activity. I was able to learn about past experiences they all had which shaped their politics, their general disposition, and how they both receive and express art."

- Fernando (activities coordinator)

Think Tank Member: Robin Lentz

Research Question: Where do I use themes, and where don't I use themes?

Each art class meets twice per cycle, classes are anywhere from 30-45 minutes depending on the day. Each class tends to have one 'long' and one 'short' class every six days. There are about 12 girls in each class.

In my time here there have been many different approaches with regards to integrating material. There have been years in which art has been all 'art for art's sake'--basically totally up to me, hands off, no pressure to integrate. And there have been years where there has been pressure to fill out shared curriculum maps (with deadlines!) that document how we are all teaching to the same themes. My favorite kind of teaching is the kind where serendipity plays a part. I begin the year with a handful of things I'm excited about--materials to explore/artists I've come across--and as I roll these out to the girls I improvise based on what excites them, and then the next lesson follows naturally, and so on and so forth. On occasion, I'll run into another teacher at the copier and mention something I'm doing, or overhear something that's happening elsewhere in their school days, and find opportunities to make connections. Currently, classroom teachers' responsibilities are increasing to include outside math/ELA systems as well as extra administrative duties, so we 'co-curriculars' have been left to our own devices, able to dial into what's happening elsewhere, or dial out, as we see fit.

Rather than go into the year thinking about themes in advance, I decided to teach the year as I normally would--and then look back and see where I used themes and where I didn't, and see if I could gauge some kind of response from the girls, and figure out what conclusions I could draw from these types of reflections.

I couldn't shake the idea of a Venn diagram, and I envisioned three circles--one for **skills and materials** (also 'art for art's sake' kinds of projects--ideas untethered to themes, but that work their way in for one reason or another), another circle for **homeroom themes**, and a third circle for any over-arching **school themes** (*Met Breuer partnership* this year, and going forward).

It was oddly satisfying to plug in the projects and see where they landed--a few projects that ended up being slight collaborations with other subjects or ideas ended up warranting another smaller circle.

After I pieced these together I started to consider the merit of adding another circle about the external artists I bring in for inspiration as our school seeks to a) include more cultural diversity, and b) maintain a commitment to choosing artists who are women over men where possible. But I'm not sure how many circles a Venn can viably support, and might need to find a new system. It would also be interesting to note how many classes each project takes (ie. kindergarten still-life project (non-themed, pictured on next page) was four lessons--but most of the other projects in that category were single day explorations), and also track the chronological order of the projects.

Art Kindergarten

New Materials and Skills

brass fastener day

cardboard stamps

hats + pom-poms

balance sculptures

still-life draw/paint

cardboard ship collage

(math)

neighbors paper mark-making/ptg's

scribble day

tape and paint

self-portraits

Mary Stephenson diagram wants/needs

reaching for potential collage
Patricia - Earl Barnes

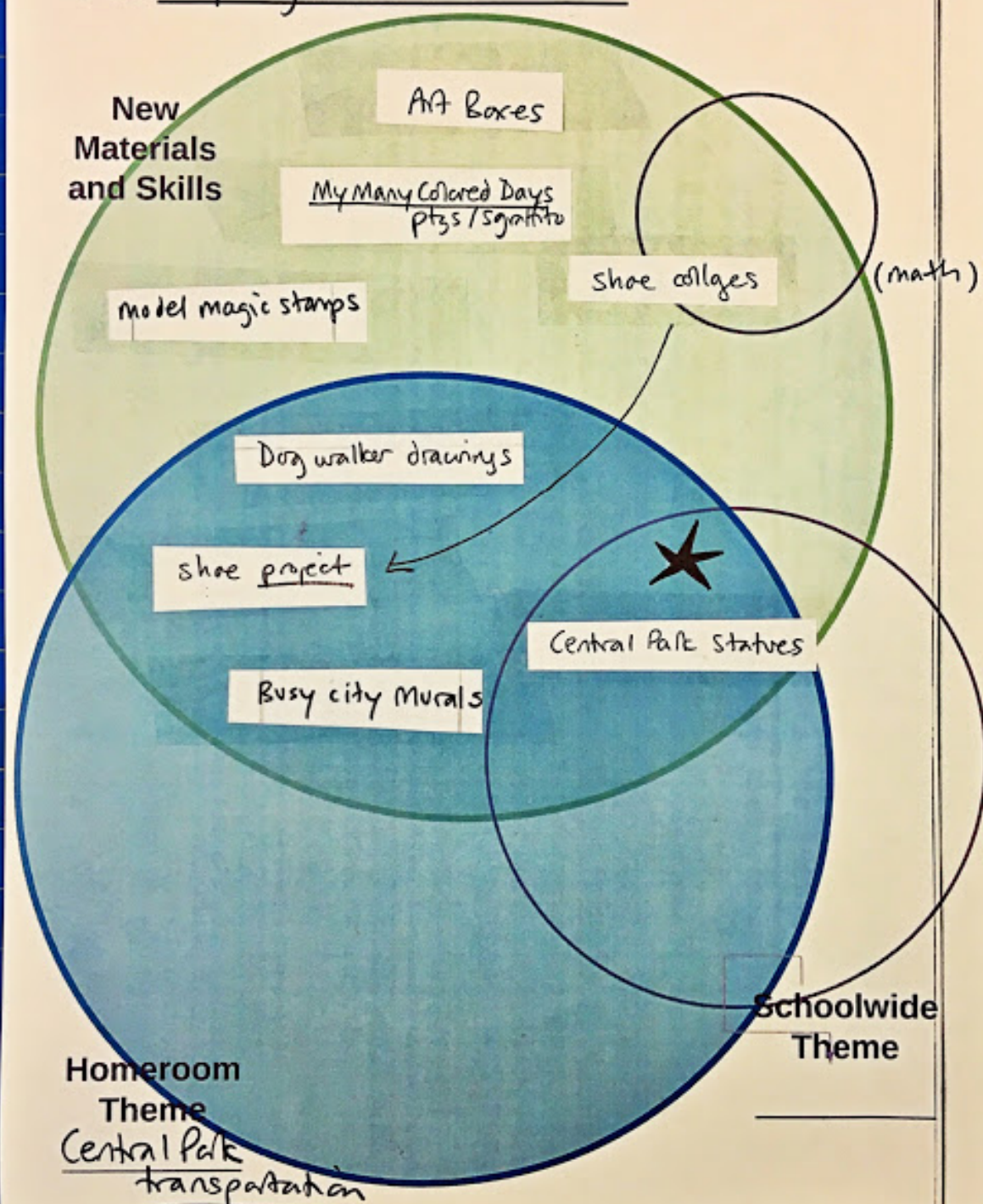
Homeroom Theme

All about ME

Schoolwide Theme

Feminist Stance

Art | 1st grade



Art 2nd grade

New
Materials
and Skills

Big Blue collages and
abstract ptzr.

Doodle Days

(Mindfulness)

realistic cat drawings
(London underground)

Vik Muniz subway mosaics

Bernard Villermot Travel Posters

moving parts playground

Vik Muniz 'trash' collages

independent woman collage
Patrick-Earl Barnes



Homeroom
Theme

NYC neighborhoods
+ city.

Schoolwide
Theme
Feminist
Stance

→Conclusion

I'm sure I was hoping to come to the conclusion that the way that I teach is just fine, and to continue doing what I'm doing. I love my job so much--the way I'm able to combine outside inspiration with personal curiosity and spontaneity--that I can't imagine a circumstance where I would've:

- a) devised some research method that might have challenged my approach or
- b) looked at the results of feedback and come to a conclusion to change thing drastically.

That said...here's what I discovered.

The older the girls get the more the projects migrate down from the 'new materials and skills' category into the shared 'homeroom theme' zone. Makes perfect sense.

Also, the older they get the more they crave 'not being told what to do'--claiming to relish open, more experimental opportunities in the art room. I doubt I'd move away from organized projects in favor of such open-ended explorations, because there's so much valuable learning in the former, but it's good to know how much they cherish these looser classes. Interesting to note though that one of my second grades is considered to be the most difficult in the whole school--and they are positively dreamy in these 'whatever you want' classes, whereas my most easy-going up-for-anything second grade class gets agitated and starts to bicker in these same kinds of moments.

I seem to be the one who is most happy when the projects are in the shaded overlapping VENN diagram zones. The more the overlap, the more satisfied I am. Creative constraints energize me, and it thrills me to look back on the Venn Diagrams and see projects that made it into that sweet spot.

The girls really seem to love the following:

- New techniques
- Uncommon materials
- Collaborative work
- Meditative work

I love the following:

- Designing projects with rich and interesting materials that don't favor the girls who are the best 'representational' artists
- Having little hooks and external 'prompts' that help me shape and organize the curriculum
- A good combination of meaty projects and experiential 'one-offs'

→ **EXAMPLE** of the 'sweet spot' projects from this year

Kindergarten "Reaching for Potential" collage

Homeroom (Music Class) Theme

All about ME, *also they learn a line from the school song 'reaching for potential' and accompanying hand/arm movement

School Theme

Feminist Stance (translation for younger grades: Girl Power)

New Materials and Skills

Self-portrait,
Arms over head pose (shoulders stay put!)
Cutting arranging paper/fabric
Painting/blending on cardboard

Outside Inspiration

Patrick-Earl Barnes--kraft paper/fabric collage using Hewitt uniform fabric (his reliance on kraft paper as an all-purpose 'skin color' worked well with the timing of this project--early enough in the year that we weren't ready for big skin-color mixing unit)



Patrick-Earl artwork



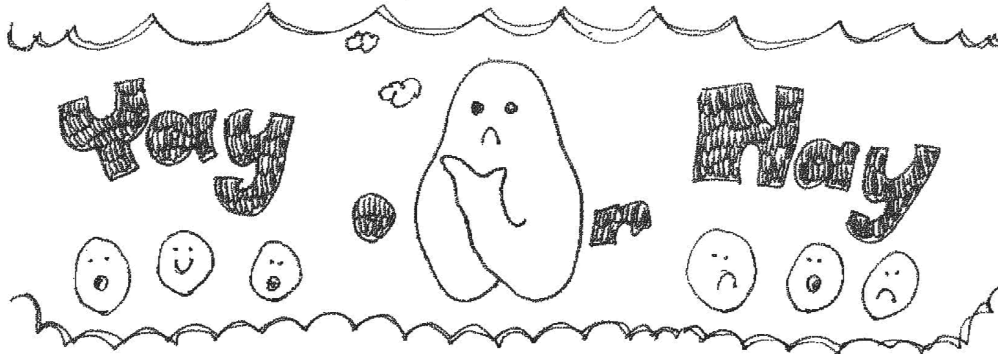
Savannah/Grace artwork

Think Tank Member: Sejin Park

Research Question: To what extent are visitors receptive to non-themed public tours at The Noguchi Museum?

THINKTANK, 2016-2017

To what extent are visitors receptive to non-themed public tours at The Noguchi?



To test this question, I surveyed tour participants over a period of five Fridays. The survey was handed out at the end. A total of eleven surveys were collected, one survey per participant.

But before starting the tour, I told participants:

- ① At the Noguchi Museum, we have more conversation based tours, where I'll ask questions & you're free to ask me questions, too.
 - ② We do want to know how we're doing, so if you don't mind, please fill out this short survey at the end of the tour. It'll just take a few minutes.
-

So:

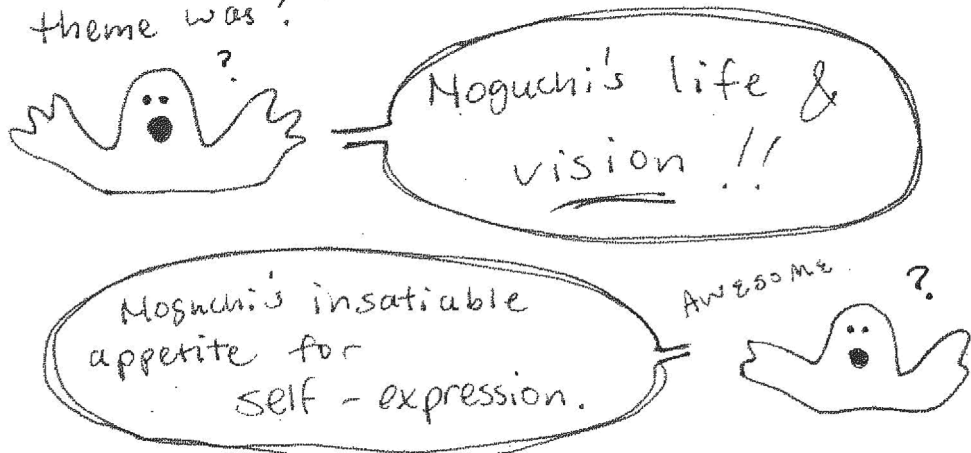
- ① Let participants know about inquiry-based, non-thematic style of tour.
- ② Let participants know that there will be a survey at the end.

Five weeks later → → →

Conclusions:

- ① Themes in a public tour can form from just context, and can be extremely general.

For example, people would answer the question "What do you think the tour theme was?"



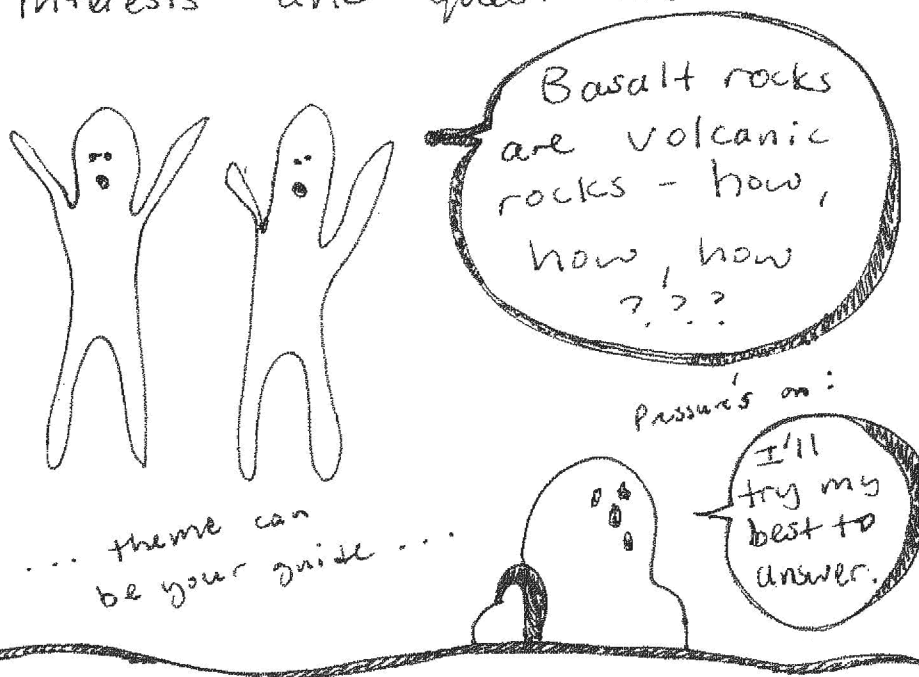
All general theme categories. The fact that the museum is about Noguchi already places the tour within a biographic theme.

Interestingly, one person did note:

"Does there have to be a theme?"

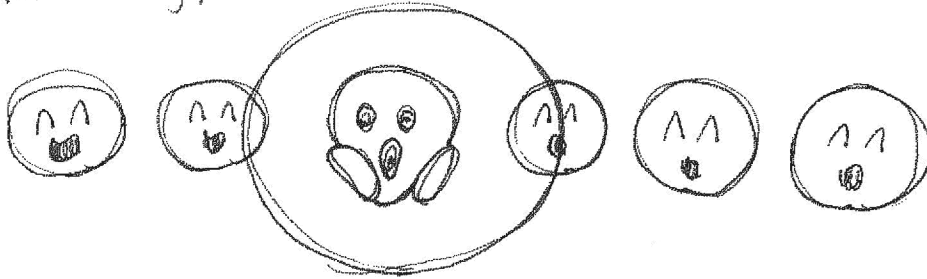


② More specific themes formed from participants' particular interests and questions:



In one tour, ~~two~~ two participants ~~were~~ were interested in the rock material and how it naturally forms & changes over time. For the theme, one participant wrote "evolution," since the "evolution" of rock material was the subject / theme that most interested him.

③ Most of the time, visitors are receptive to tours that are, at least initially, non-themed.



All participants circled the "happy" emoji for the last question on the survey, "please circle an emoji below." Except one person who circled the "shocked" emoji. Was he just so ^{am}shocked^{ed} at how amazing the tour was? This will always stay a mystery

OVERALL ➔

I'll continue with these surveys, it's interesting to see the variety of feedback from participants who take the same tour. Truly, to each to their own.

Think Tank Member: Julie Orr

Research Question: Can you do a standards-based museum visit without themes and meet objectives?

NGSS: K-2 Engineering Standards

- Students who demonstrate understanding can:
 - K-2-ETS1-1. Ask questions, make observations, and gather information about a situation people want to change to define a simple problem that can be solved through the development of a new or improved object or tool.
 - K-2-ETS1-2. Develop a simple sketch, drawing, or physical model to illustrate how the shape of an object helps it function as needed to solve a given problem.
 - K-2-ETS1-3. Analyze data from tests of two objects designed to solve the same problem to compare the strengths and weaknesses of how each performs.

Initial thoughts: Themes are the individual threads that connect seemingly different parts of a museum's collection to an overarching idea. The Intrepid Museum follows certain themes (i.e. Sea, Air, and Space). These themes allow educators the freedom to creatively connect the collections to the particular themes. I don't think you can achieve a standards based museum visit without themes because without continuity in the museum, the program lacks consistency.

Project: Students experimented with an egg drop project first, and then a non-thematic approach to creating inventions.

Egg Drop:



Inventions:



Overall Findings:

I do think themes are key for teaching in museums. In some place like a history or science museum, or even in a temporary, highly focused art exhibition, they're a bit baked into the actual exhibition content which can provide nice guidelines, but in places like universal museums and even HHMs (where there is a narrative present, but not necessarily direct themes in content) themes are key to providing a coherent and meaningful experience. They can be great for putting together disparate or seemingly unrelated objects and allowing the visitors to create meaningful connections between objects or facts and foster personalized educational experiences. I personally think the meaning of a visit comes from how people are processing things and relating them to personal history, focusing more on the why rather than the what.

Why do I use themes? (or why is it so hard for me to give them up?)

- Relative thinking
- Linking memories
- Improving my storytelling
- Scaffolding
- Limited time with students

Think Tank Member: Liz Titone

Research Question: What is the role of themes in a student-curated show?

My initial response to the concept of themes was “Nope, not me. I like spontaneous flow in my classroom.” The more I thought about it, the more I came to recognize the necessity of themes when introducing potentially complicated or emotional work.

During the spring I co-curated an exhibition with a colleague and three upper school students for our gallery on campus. In [The Most Important Picture: Syria](#) young refugees shine a light on their world so that others may see it more clearly. Through writing and photography workshops led by The Most Important Picture’s creator Brendan Bannon, children express themselves in poignant prose and striking photographs.

The Most Important Picture was an exhibition that demanded interpretation through themes. Without the themes, our students defaulted to pity, confusion, and anxiety, or worse, apathy. Providing a theme for discussion in the gallery allowed us to harness the range of emotions and inquiry the students were putting forth. Similarly, the student curators I worked with on the exhibition needed themes to make sense of making sense for others. In the end, they decided to use portions of the accompanying text rather than headers for each topic; choosing not to pigeonhole or overtly direct the viewer experience. Younger students visiting the gallery frequently wondered how the images were organized. Many asked what the “chapter titles” were since they didn’t see any signs. I built a guessing game into our activities: students were invited to create their own themes and curation of the show. This often allowed me to have a deeper conversation about what they were seeing in the images and reading in the text. I am wondering if, by having a “job” to do, the students relaxed into the content and perhaps took a ownership of their opinions. Unfortunately, because this line of inquiry happened organically, I have no documentation of these conversations.

I noticed that without headers, students and adults visiting the exhibition naturally/instinctively tried to make categories to attach their experiences to. At times it felt as though I had sent an incomplete table and the diners provided the necessary pieces, regardless of if they were necessary for the meal. By the time the show closed, I was left wondering if themes are necessary for processing information or if we are so used to this pattern or system of analysis that we involuntarily look for compartments to place our thoughts and emotions in. And if so, does the urgency to assign themes vary with content? Why? Why not?



THE MOST IMPORTANT PICTURE: SYRIA

Photographs and writing by Syrian children living in refugee camps



And my tent has become my university, a lab, a studio, a theater...
And in it I became the teacher, the professor, the student, the guard, the actor, the dancer, and even the photographer... - Hany



Each year millions of children flee their homes to escape armed conflict. Growing up in exile, sometimes orphaned or separated from loved ones, they are haunted by violence and loss – but also resilient enough to envision better days ahead.

In **The Most Important Picture: Syria**, young refugees shine a light on their world so that others may see it more clearly. In 2007, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – the UN Refugee Agency charged with protecting and assisting refugees around the world, put out a call for a participatory photo project. Photographer Brendan Bannon answered the call and since then, has worked with youth in the refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as many others around the world.

The **The Most Important Picture** project provides children with, 'an incredible two week experience that provides fun, exploration learning, team building and new friendships and strategies for problem solving all in a safe environment'. The photographs come from a series of workshops that Bannon led with children in refugee camps and tented settlements in Lebanon and Jordan in 2014-2015.

The goal of the collaboration is to 'amplify the children's voices so that the world can hear what they think and see what they see'. Over the course of the workshops, children are given a series of projects that teach them problem solving skills as well as photography. Through brainstorming, writing, and open-ended photo assignments that encourage creativity, the children learn to think in new ways about what a picture is and can do. They make art not simple selfies or ID photos.

The students choose their most meaningful images and write explanations. Through the combination of image and words they magnify, intensify and compound meaning.

Photography and creative writing allow children a safe place to explore the complexity

of their lives. These youth have endured, often silently, the most dehumanizing of circumstances. With these pictures they speak to the world and see that people are paying attention.

The photos in this exhibit were presented by Bannon to represent the humanity of his students. A team of Packer student curators chose a set of images that explore themes such as boundaries, intimacy and rituals. They are but a small portion of the wealth of images created by the participants in the program.

For kids who need it, art and self expression are a matter of survival. Through art-making, you have the opportunity to regenerate a sense of belonging while making sense of the world around you. For these youth, forced to flee home, photography provides the means to create a survivor's culture while building relationships with other refugees. Through art we share our common humanity and can begin healing by connecting to others.

"Communication, building bridges, challenging perceptions, problem solving and connecting with others are all a part of being a photographer and a human being" said Bannon.

This exhibit invites you to witness the humanity of these young artists and to reflect on their experience.

These refugee photographers continue to explore their circumstances and create meaning from chaos. Brendan Bannon is currently planning follow up workshops in the camps. This exhibition is being shared around the world. More info at www.most-importantpicture.org

Student Curators: Destini Armstrong, Delilah Draper, Lucy Friedberg, Paul McLaren, and Katie Panczner.

Faculty Curators: Tené Howard and Liz Titone.