

2014-2015

Teacher Think Tank

What have you always wanted to try in your teacher practice?
What does it mean to experiment? When is a risk worth taking?



"Risk and failure go hand in hand rather than being conditions to be avoided. To assume that knowledge grows best in a cloistered setting is to ignore the benefits of shared doubt."

Sullivan, Graeme. "The Art of Research." *Studies In Art Education*, 55.4 (2014):270-286. Print

INTRODUCTION:

The Noguchi Museum's Teacher Think Tank is a group of classroom teachers and museum educators who meet five times during the school year to collaboratively explore topics related to school and museum education. During the third year of the Think Tank, the group was comprised of 15 new and returning members representing a diverse mix of schools and cultural institutions in the tri state area. Collectively we explored the questions: What have you always wanted to try in your teacher practice? What does it mean to experiment? When is a risk worth taking? During our meetings we discussed these larger questions while creating and refining small individual action research projects. Each member went off and investigated their individual questions. We all shared the progress of our experiments throughout the year and at the end, presentations of our results and reflections on the process. Some of us discovered new paths we had not imagined before through failure and some of us came away with successful, replicable experiments. All of us benefitted from sharing our challenges and struggles with a group of colleagues whose support and encouragement propelled us forward. We hope this document, which summarizes the results of some of those investigations, will provide the inspiration for others to try out their own experiments and take risks in their teaching practices. Please note that each section was written by the individual educator. If you are interested in learning more about one of the experiments or the Think Tank more generally please email education@noguchi.org.

THINK TANK MEMBER: Jacqueline Novello

SCHOOL/ INSTITUTION: P.S. 98 Shorac Kappock Elementary

PARTICIPANTS: Fourth Grade ICT Class

GUIDING QUESTION(S): How can I integrate art into my curriculum as a classroom teacher?

SUMMARY OF EXPERIMENT:

As a classroom teacher in a testing grade, I had to find ways to teach art while still ensuring I taught all necessary material for the state exams.

Here is a list of what I did:

- Introduced the children to as many artists as possible through biographies.
- Dedicated a page on the class website to art. It has links to museums and artist biographies. Also, I included art project ideas that could be done at home
- I led a weekly art club one period a week.
- I created a class art notebook. All students had the opportunity to take it home for a night and create. I provided some basic collage and drawing materials.
- Art journals were provided to students who expressed an interest in maintaining one. I explained they didn't have to do it every single day but most days. Most of the children who received the journal finished it before the end of the year and asked for a second one.
- I established a partnership with Behind the Book, a non-profit that brings authors and illustrators to classrooms and helps students publish a book. I chose to work with Maira Kalman because she is both an author and illustrator. The published book was a success! All students wrote a part and illustrated as well.
- We took many field trips throughout the year, for example, The Museum of Modern Art, The Guggenheim and The New York Historical Society.

SUPPORTING IMAGES/ DOCUMENTS:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1_QquDz_86rZBY9z_zQmg5B4EgwHcLTBBAdBzLue6fIA/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000

THINK TANK MEMBER: Katie Henry

SCHOOL/ INSTITUTION: Hudson River Museum

PARTICIPANTS: Junior Docents

GUIDING QUESTION(S): How can I listen more and step back from talking?

SUMMARY OF EXPERIMENT:

I had the teens work on a Teen Night event at the Hudson River Museum that they completed in April. It was really successful in that they had ownership of the event and followed through with all responsibilities. It empowered them and I made sure to let them take over advisory board meetings during the planning and the day of the event. I think going forward I would give them even more control including letting them pick a community organization to partner with to increase attendance. It was a great first teen night and I am glad that the experiment was positive.

THINK TANK MEMBER: Madeleine Stern

SCHOOL/ INSTITUTION: Friends Seminary

PARTICIPANTS: 4th Grade

GUIDING QUESTION(S):

How can I use more performance in art class? How can I help students have a clear understanding that while playful, it is more than play?

SUMMARY OF EXPERIMENT:

As a culminating ceramics project, 4th graders made dinner sets (spoon, cup, bowl, plate) using hand building, slab, and coil techniques. While working on this long-term project, we looked at art that uses domestic paraphernalia or food, especially work with a performance aspect. Then, through several group-planning sessions, each class designed performances and made specific props or tools. Performances were filmed and/or photographed and posted on our art blog. One used apples, cheese, cutting boards, and knives borrowed from the cafeteria with toothpicks to create edible sculptures among the dinner sets. Another class smashed individual piñatas, and the last class made blindfolds and played heads up 7 up with popcorn. I am excited about this project because it felt like a series of risks and developing experiments – introducing and documenting performance art in lower school, giving the students control over planning, and building our understanding of performance.

THINK TANK MEMBER: Anne Spurgeon

SCHOOL/ INSTITUTION: The Noguchi Museum

PARTICIPANTS: 11 adults

GUIDING QUESTION(S):

How can I engage a public, adult audience with sketching as a way to carefully observe a work of art? What sketching methods are most effective? How does it deepen the conversation?

SUMMARY OF EXPERIMENT:

First Exploration

- Participants included a couple visiting New York.
- For this experiment, participants, were directed to a specific work of art to sketch and invited to sketch the entire sculpture or just a part of it.
- Activity took place in a small gallery and sequentially at the end of the tour.
- Stools, pencils, paper, and clipboards were provided for the sketching activity.
- Informal discussion took place between the two visitors after sketching activity happened and after the tour “ended”.

Second Exploration

- Participants included three adults.
- Participants were asked to sketch a work of art that interested them.
- They were invited to create a sketch of the entire sculpture or just a part of it.
- Activity took place in a large gallery (Area 3) and sequentially at the end of the tour.
- Pencils, worksheets, and clipboards were provided for the sketching activity.
- No discussion happened due to time restrictions.

Worksheets introduced:

- Select an artwork that interests you. Use the blank space below to create a sketch of the entire sculpture or just a part of it. When finished, please turn over and answer the questions.
- Did you notice anything different about this artwork while sketching?
- Did you enjoy the process of sketching? YES / NO
- Please explain.
- Additional comments?

Responses:

- Did you notice anything different? *“Depth, much more texture, how it sits on the stand.”*
- Did you enjoy the process of sketching? *“It was more about connecting with the art.”*

Third Exploration

- Participants included six adults.
- Participants were asked to sketch a work of art that interested them.
- They were invited to create a sketch of the entire sculpture or just a part of it.
- Activity took place in the floating gallery (variety of materials and process).
- Sketching was offered towards the end of the tour.
- Pencils, worksheets, and clipboards were provided for the sketching activity.
- Discussion recorded.

Some things I discover:

- About half the audience I asked were willing to sketch.
- Allowing participants to select an artwork in a gallery with a variety of works was most effective.
- Most of the participants enjoyed sketching.
- Sketching may provide a personal or meaningful experience with a work of art.

What’s next:

- Experiment with the amount of time devoted to sketching within a tour.
- Experiment with the conversation that follows a sketching activity within a tour.
- Experiment with the personal and meaningful experiences sketching may provide.
- Experiment with a collaborative sketching activity.

THINK TANK MEMBER: Asya Gribov

SCHOOL/ INSTITUTION: Rubin Museum of Art

PARTICIPANTS: Russian –speaking families at various institutions

GUIDING QUESTION(S):

How can I best engage Russian-speaking families in museum education while simultaneously addressing the needs of the parents and staying true to my objectives as an arts/museum educator?

SUMMARY OF EXPERIMENT:

I created a program that invited Russian-speaking families to tours and events at various museums and art exhibits around New York that I had created with the target audience in mind.

Goal: Create a platform for innovative programs that invite Russian-speaking families to engage with various cultural events, art institutions, and artists in New York.

Actions:

- Research
- Marketing and Outreach
- Visibility

Outcomes:

- Russian Cultural Day at the Children’s Museum of the Arts
- Private tours for families at The Metropolitan, MoMA, Guggenheim, and others

SUPPORTING IMAGES/ DOCUMENTS:

https://prezi.com/ubptr_ojuxfj/present/?follow=jcc5n4liq28a&auth_key=cozcnf2#181_24309637

THINK TANK MEMBER: Robin Lentz

SCHOOL/ INSTITUTION: Hewitt School

PARTICIPANTS: 48 Third grade girls

GUIDING QUESTION(S):

How can I give the kids a meaningful three-dimensional experience given our **extremely limited space**?

SUMMARY OF EXPERIMENT:

The Lower School art room at Hewitt is notoriously tiny. As many as 18 girls sit around one large table, there's little room to walk around the table when the classroom is full, and even more limited space for storing anything other than 2-D artwork. I've often felt guilty that my art program doesn't include meaningful 3-D work, by meaningful I mean something large that is worked on for many many classes, as opposed to a small sculptural one-off that doesn't allow for as much tinkering and exploration. Also, Hewitt is an all-girls school, and I think it's important that girls have art experiences that require some amount of physical exploration; projects that involve more than sitting still—something I think that can be detrimental to girls already exhibiting perfectionist tendencies.

I came across the work of Marisol Escobar while attending a Warhol film-festival at BAM, and I was instantly drawn to her large, four-sided sculptures. That they are portraits also intrigued me, because in the spring I often focus on portraiture with the third grade—posing for each other, traditional face proportions, etc. Also, the fact that she is a woman (and still alive) was exciting for all-involved.

Third grade girls noticed that Marisol Escobar incorporated realistic faces onto her otherwise whimsical, multi-media sculptures. Since they had just finished a unit on drawing faces, the project would be well-timed. I gave the girls color-copies of the faces they'd drawn, and the only 'rule' was that one of their faces had to appear on one side of one box. All other choices were completely up to them.

The 3-D management problem was easily reconciled by having the girls work on cardboard boxes—objects that can be worked on, and stored, in their FLAT form, and then popped open into three dimensions at the very end.

I ordered several different sizes of cardboard boxes from U-Line (at about 33c each). I provided collage materials, adhesives, fabric, paints (tempera cakes + white acrylic paint so that it would adhere and 'pop' on the brown boxes), and then basically 'got out of the way' while the girls explored and problem-solved their way through their own various visions.

The girls stood the boxes on their 'flaps' after each class so the boxes could dry, and then once dry, I could flatten them and stack them and secure each bundle with a rubber band. The art room was indeed way too crowded on the final day of the project—the day when all

the flats were transformed into actual boxes and were attached to each other (one class used Velcro dots to adhere their boxes, others used hot-glue), but if anything that just drove home for me how impossible it would have been to have worked on anything other than boxes that could be flat for the bulk of the work-time.

The project was a huge success—the girls approached their sculptures in many different ways—some girls took the front/back/sides element literally and created one cohesive portrait, others created four different characters, still some created one character and then enjoyed full creative freedom on the other sides. The only thing I would do differently is offer bigger boxes next time. Now that I know how seamless the flat-3-D aspect is, there's really no limit to how large we could go.

SUPPORTING IMAGES/ DOCUMENTS:



THINK TANK MEMBER: Shannon Murphy

SCHOOL/ INSTITUTION: The Guggenheim

PARTICIPANTS: A variety of audiences at The Guggenheim

GUIDING QUESTION(S): How can I add mindfulness or meditation exercises to museum tours?

SUMMARY OF EXPERIMENT:

I tried out a number of mindfulness exercises and integral meditations on my tours with students at the Guggenheim. Mudras were very popular in the galleries. A mudra is a body position that creates an energy flow through the body. I also led students through breathing exercises such as alternate side nostril breathing and deep belly breathing. The meditations varied on the works of art and the energy level of the group of students. Sometimes I had students look silently after a breathing exercise, and other times I lead them through a verbal description. Either way, students were encouraged to concentrate their focus on just the work of art. Ellen Langer's work on mindfulness really inspired my approach to the guided meditations.

I also experimented with bringing mindfulness to my tours as an educator. Inspired by Richard Davidson's emotional styles, I brought a greater awareness to my students' emotions. I paid closer attention to their outlook when they entered the museum, their non-verbal facial expressions and body language, and a general presence to the experience. I presented this work at NYCMER and learned so much from my colleagues. One of the biggest take aways was that it's our responsibility to take care of ourselves first, and then we'll be best able to take care of our students.

SUPPORTING IMAGES/ DOCUMENTS:



Students holding a Jin Shin Jyutsu mudra at the Guggenheim.

THINK TANK MEMBER: Amy Boyle

SCHOOL/ INSTITUTION: The Noguchi Museum

PARTICIPANTS: Teacher Think Tank 2014-15 group

GUIDING QUESTION(S): How can I add, step back, and remain in control of a group? What techniques or tactics work? What won't work?

SUMMARY OF EXPERIMENT:

This year I was the facilitator of the Teacher Think Tank and I used my role to conduct action research into the idea of shared authority with a professional development group such as the Think Tank. I spent a lot of time thinking through the idea of shared authority which I had presented on with colleagues at the 2014 AAM conference and our group had defined at that presentation as developing equitable, mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships with members of your community (however defined) and welcoming them as full partners in giving voice to a project or initiative you care about. I tried to put these ideas into practice and think about how I could facilitate a group, make sure the group felt cohesive and useful to the members but step back to the level that I did not present myself as a leader or authority on the topics we were exploring. I also wanted to think about the idea of the museum, The Noguchi Museum in this case, as simply being a site for discussion and not the focus of a group like this. As the representative of the museum I was not providing a great deal of content on our collections but rather using the Museum and the figure of Isamu Noguchi as inspiration for our explorations.

After reflecting on this year I am not sure if I was entirely successful in my experiment, there were times I felt I went too far in one direction or another but I do feel that the key to this approach is remaining present. One of the most challenging aspects of being an educator is making sure that you have a thoughtful, well planned out lesson with a group you are working with but also being completely responsive to what is happening while you are with them, responding to the needs of that particular group in that moment. I think the moments when I could let go enough to be present with the group and act as a full participant in whatever we were doing were the most successful and frankly rewarding for me personally. I feel that setting intentions instead of goals or objectives helps with this notion in that it enables you to not focus on one particular outcome but rather think about what you hope to do instead of what you hope others to learn. You also have to be comfortable sometimes totally losing control. I think the most challenging thing to achieve is a sense of shared responsibility- I did turn over the group to others in Think Tank d using a number of our sessions but still had to remain a constant resource to guide those moments. The result of this experiment for me was gaining insight into my own comfort levels with this approach and with how to create a feeling of fellowship and mutual responsibility with a group. I would like to keep working out this approach with other groups and ages and finding the right balance of letting go and focus. I think experimenting with body language is the next

step I would like to take. For example I would like to really study how where I stand or sit with a group affects the discussion in t he galleries.

SUPPORTING IMAGES/ DOCUMENTS:



Photos by Katherine Abbott