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Home > Vol 3, No 2 (2013) > **Hayhoe**

A Practice Report of Students from a School for the Blind Leading Groups of Younger Mainstream Students in Visiting a Museum and Making Multi-modal Artworks

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Abstract

What can a visually impaired student achieve in art education? Can visually impaired students teach sighted students about elements of perception that sighted students would not normally consider? Are the legal moves towards the right to equal access for visually impaired people useful in asserting that visually impaired students can gain as much from gallery exhibits as sighted students can? In this article, these questions are studied in a practice report of a course involving visually impaired and sighted students working together in groups, studying in a museum, and creating art work at schools for the blind. The study argues that sighted and visually impaired students can each learn about the other group's perceptual similarities and potentials by working together, and that art is a particularly effective medium for developing this understanding. Furthermore, it is observed that the visually impaired students discussed in this article had as much potential to develop art works as their sighted counterparts.

Key words

Art education, museums, visual disability, schools for the blind, art, touch tours, perception.

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Introduction

This article is a practice report of a three month course in the United Kingdom (UK) involving teams of four 9- and 10-year-old students from the Orchard House School in London (a mainstream school accepting all students, no matter what their ability) being led by 15- and 16-year-old students from the Royal London Society for the Blind's Dorton House School in Kent. The course was structured in 4 phases. The first phase included a visit to Orchard House School by a London-based charity, BlindArt, to teach mainstream students about visual impairment (i.e. "sight loss that cannot be corrected using glasses or contact lenses" (NHS, 2012)). During the second phase students from Orchard School and Dorton House met at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), London to choose artworks. In the third phase all of the students met at Dorton House to create their pieces, in separate groups. Finally, during the fourth phase an exhibition of the students' work was built and displayed during a charity show at the Henry Moore Gallery, Royal College of Art, London. This course as a whole combined two unusual elements in its philosophy and practice of art education, these being the use of all of the senses in the production of art works and the inclusion of task work by visually impaired and sighted students on an equal footing.

The aims of this course were to explore the notion that students who were visually impaired could lead teams of sighted students in the making of art works, thus fostering innovative arts practices and task management skills. In addition, the course was designed to encourage education officers, teachers, and researchers who worked with students with disabilities in schools and museums to develop their own courses with mixed groups of sighted and visually impaired students. The long term objective of the course was to encourage exhibitions of students' work that could be appreciated equally by sighted and visually impaired people, and to inform future research on the art education of visually impaired students in classrooms, colleges, and gallery settings.

The report of this course comes in the wake of the next phase of legalized access of people with disabilities to cultural and arts institutions, as set out in the UK by the Equality Act 2010 (Great Britain, Parliament, 2010), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA Amendment Act, 2008). This article also informs and contextualizes more recent case study research on museum education by visually impaired visitors (Hayhoe, 2012, 2013), which establishes that visually impaired visitors and students can learn from non-touchable artworks if they are described in combination with proximity to them; as the symbolic inclusion of a person in a museum can develop cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2010) and self-esteem in the participants, as well as foster an understanding of so-called visual culture.

What now follows is a description of this project through a review of the literature that grounded and formed the basis of the project, a description of the stages involved in the implementation of the project (including the problems that were encountered by the course teachers), a summary of observations by teachers and students, and a conclusion on the learning experiences of the students and schools involved. This process begins with a description of previous discussion on art and visual impairment based on existing research on this issue.

The Philosophy of Educating Visually Impaired Students in the Arts

Surveys on the history of art education and visually impaired students in schools and museums (Hayhoe, 2003, 2008a, in press) observe that the history of such exclusion in the UK dates back to the early philosophical and scientific notions of visual impairment, and focuses on the misapprehension that visually impaired people

cannot understand art. Paulson (1987) and Hayhoe (2008a) argue that the context of this belief dates back to a debate between the enlightenment philosophers Locke and Molyneux as to whether a person who is born blind (i.e. a visual impairment that leads to no sight at all) can immediately recognize an object based solely on touch experiences alone (Locke, 2001).

Since the publication of these early philosophies, later influential philosophical and experimental studies have focused on people who are blind from birth with the understanding that blind people in particular are mainly a perceptual and not a cultural community (Berkeley, 1899; Diderot, 2001; Merleau-Ponty, 2002; von Senden, 1960; Révész, 1950; Gregory & Wallace, 1974), and the belief that many aspects of pictorial representations cannot be understood through touch. For example, in his book *Psychology and the Art of the Blind*, Révész (1950) concludes that blind people can have no discernible aesthetic appreciation of art exhibits, as

[From] what sources could a blind person, who has never seen the world with all its wealth of forms and color, derive those manifold experiences?... [No] one born blind is able to become aware of the diversity of nature and to apprehend all the rich and various appearances of objects. (pp. 316–17)

These assumptions are so ingrained in the dialect of the education of visually impaired students that the models of study and their accompanying theorization are observable in both museum and school teaching, as well as in literature, in the twenty first century (Hayhoe, 2008a, 2013, in press). For example, the philosopher Hopkins (2000) argues that blind people who have no visual memory cannot understand what are considered to be visual concepts such as perspective.

It is only in the last ten years that empirical studies have challenged the notion that visual concepts cannot be understood by blind people, even those without visual memories. For example, Kennedy (2008), Kennedy and Juricevic (2006), and Heller et al. (2006), have all found that people born without sight have the capacity to reproduce concepts such as visual metaphor and perspective without formal education in these concepts. In addition, experimental studies involving the dulling of different senses under laboratory conditions by Driver and Spence (2004) have questioned the notion of the exclusivity of touch as the only perception that can provide effective information, and argue instead that perception is multi-modal, (i.e. that all senses work in concert to inform a holistic image of objects and phenomena).

Despite this contemporary research, studies in art classes for visually impaired students in schools and colleges, and visitors to museums, demonstrate that contemporary research has relatively little impact on the policies and educational theories of institutional education for visually impaired students, or on teachers' understanding of the art education of visually impaired people in the new millennium (Hayhoe, 2000, 2008b, in press).

For example, during interviews with students and teachers in the UK and USA, the practices and experiences of students in a number of schools for the blind, as well as visually impaired students in mainstream schools after inclusion, often reflected negative beliefs about the ability of visually impaired art students (Hayhoe, 2000, 2008b). In one instance it was reported that a student had been taught separately from sighted peers, was made to use different materials and tools, and was given different tasks and topics while still being in the same classroom. In this instance he found that his teachers were unwilling to believe that he could draw during art classes, and made him afraid of performing drawing tasks in future projects. This avoidance of drawing was found to persist when he transferred to a school for the blind and began an art A Level course. On this issue, Hayhoe (2008b) concludes,

All of the students that I observed who had suffered harmful experiences during art tasks in their mainstream schooling, whether this was in a mainstream institution or a school for the blind, *always* became evasive when they were presented with the same or similar tasks later. Distinctly similar observations were also made by the experienced art teachers I interviewed in England and the United States. Above all, the evidence I gathered at New College and Leicester University showed that there was no single cause and effect between [their current] teaching and students' sense of self-worth. (p.159)

Recent studies make similar observations about exclusion from education and the arts, and suggest that disabled people are often deliberately excluded from society by a predominantly able-bodied culture. For example, social research draws analogies between the legal prejudice shown to students with disabilities in the twentieth century and those from minority ethnic families in Canada in the nineteenth century, particularly in their separate educational provision (Valeo, 2009). Furthermore, Darke (2003) argues that even the disability arts movement, a form of art designed to provide disabled artists with their own voice in the broader community, has been misappropriated in mainstream museums and funding bodies in order to suppress its radical culture, as such groups largely remove political and intellectual content from education and commission pieces. Literature on policy implementation has also maintained that the design of institutions has excluded people with disabilities from institutions through a notion of "normal" ability (Allen, 2004; Gleeson, 1999). Candlin (2003) discusses this notion in a museum education context.

Tokenistic drop-in provision or occasional educational events do not qualify as making museums accessible. What, as museum and gallery staff we need to do, is to recognise the ways in which multisensory experience can be supported and incorporated into daily practice. Only by making non-visual learning routine will blind people cease to be defined primarily in terms of their visual impairment and be able to participate in ways that are satisfying to them as diverse individuals. (p. 109)

In order to nullify many of the negative causes of exclusion, teachers at Orchard House designed a course to test the validity of not using traditional techniques employed by students from mainstream schools and schools for the blind, instead allowing students to think of and develop their own forms of perceptual information. It was felt this could help develop self-expression and promote inclusion in both groups of students. The resulting course is now described below.

Towards a New Understanding of Art Education for Visually Impaired Students

The course, called the 4 Senses Project, took a different approach to traditional museum art courses and other notions of inclusion for visually impaired people in its methodology and philosophy. Rather than producing, commissioning, or choosing pieces of art purely for the use of people who are visually impaired, it proposed to mix sighted and visually impaired student groups in art classes to produce artworks that could be appreciated by both types of people, and that emphasized the four senses they had in common. The artworks that were made were then to be displayed in an exhibition that would foster a sense of pride in the work of the students. The project was coordinated by Orchard House, Dorton House, the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), and BlindArt (a charity based in London).

The project challenged the previous art education of visually impaired students outlined in the review of the literature above, and instead began with the following five assumptions based on the contemporary research of Driver and Spence (2004). These authors observed that senses are not discrete, but work together

to form a cohesive whole. Thus it was thought that people who have debilitated perceptions (e.g. visual impairment or deafness) can receive more effective communication from an artwork through their five senses working as a whole, that vision should continue to be included to communicate with the majority of people with full sensual perceptions, that art can be communicated through indirect means such as verbal or written language, and that art favoring four senses can provide the fully sighted viewer with a different understanding of their world and the subjective nature of perception as a whole.

The Phases of the Project

The project conducted with sighted students from Orchard House and visually impaired students from Dorton House was organized in four distinct phases, three of which lasted for approximately one month each. There were to be five learning outcomes for this project. These were: (1) the comprehensibility of the final artefacts to the visually impaired and sighted audience at the eventual exhibition, (2) whether the students communicated with each other about their artistic preferences and perceptions, (3) whether the students could work in groups, (4) whether the final artworks addressed all of the senses, and (5) whether the sighted students had a more realistic impression of what it was like to be visually impaired afterwards. The eventual course and its constituent exercises are now described below.

Phase One: Students from Orchard House were given art exercises in representing themselves non-visually. In addition, a representative from BlindArt came to the school and gave a presentation about her organisation, and the way in which it explored art through pieces that could be perceived through a number of senses. This presentation included the introduction of artefacts and a display on their webpage. During these exercises, she described how she appreciated art—she was registered visually impaired herself—and students discussed the sense experiences of this teacher's and others' visual impairments. The students then explored tactile pictures and other objects, and were given the opportunity to write their name in Braille on the BlindArt website. This exercise fulfilled the fifth learning outcome, in that it gave sighted students a more realistic idea of what it was like to have a severe visual impairment.

After this lesson, the Orchard House students were given the task of creating a self-portrait emphasizing four non-visual senses and de-emphasizing sight. Students thought of smells (such as soaps or perfumes), touch sensations (such as Vaseline or dry leaves), tastes (such as sweets or chili), and sounds (including pieces of music or voices) and then made a representative collage of these pieces. The materials for this project were not only traditional arts materials—such as clay, paper, or paint from the classroom's storage cupboard—but also included items found in the school gardens and the students' own homes. The students discussed these materials in groups before they collected them. This exercise addressed the fourth learning outcome, that students should build artworks that addressed all of the senses.

Phase Two: The students from Dorton House met with the students from Orchard House at the V&A. During this visit, they were divided into mixed groups, with four students from Orchard House for every one student from Dorton House (the latter having very small teaching groups and art electives.) During this visit, the students first toured the V&A with an experienced guide and then chose pieces from the museum that they wanted to recreate emphasizing the shared four non-visual senses.

The three pieces eventually chosen were a gold 15th Century Chinese Sakyamuni Buddha from the Asian Gallery, a crystal branch from the Glass Gallery, and a series of flame-shaped pieces from the Glass Gallery—this latter highly visual and well-lit gallery

appeared most popular with all of the students. It was commented on by the contributing teachers that even though the visually impaired students had little residual vision, they still favoured the sense of sight over touch and hearing. All of the chosen pieces were behind glass in the museum, and no tactile pieces were chosen even though they were part of the tour. After the groups had chosen their pieces, they met over lunch and discussed how they would like to represent them. During these discussions, the students also chose the materials they were to use for the art-making process. This phase of the course fulfilled the second and third learning outcomes, showing that students could communicate with each other and work in mixed groups of sighted and visually impaired students.

Phase Three: In this phase, both groups of students met again at Dorton House for two whole working days over the period of a week to make four senses representations of pieces from the museum. The students mainly worked in their assigned groups from the V&A visit, although some people wandered between groups to see how others were creating their pieces, and to help other groups during periods where they had less to do. Materials used for the tactile representations included mud rock, papier-mâché, UPVC glue, chicken wire and similar wire strands, and marshmallows. In addition, students discussed further sensory representations that could only be brought on the day of the exhibition, such as noises (through music and downloaded sound effects), smells (through flowery perfumes, sweet marshmallows, soot, and wood), and tastes (through chili flavoured crisps, mangoes and other fruit, and further marshmallows presented in bowls, jugs, and plastic cups). This phase also fulfilled the second, third, and fourth learning outcomes—the latter being to produce an artwork.

Phase Four: The finished pieces were installed and exhibited at an exhibition designed by BlindArt in London. The student section of the exhibition was opened by the professional artist Gary Sergeant, who was himself visually impaired from childhood. Orchard House students arranged the gallery for the arrival of the larger pieces of the Buddha and the flame from the Dorton House and installed the marshmallow branch while the Dorton House mini-bus was delayed by snow. Accessibility for visitors was also considered during the installation through the use of floor tape in the galleries which showed those with low vision the area of the exhibit and allowed a passage for wheelchair users. Students and teachers also setup stereos to play the chosen sounds—including music by Arthur Brown, the Doors, Jimmy Hendrix, and many stage sound effects—and arranged bowls of food and jugs or cups of juice. This phase fulfilled the first learning outcome, as the students were able and confident enough to exhibit their final pieces, and make them readily accessible to visually impaired and sighted viewers alike.

Outcomes of the Project

The measurable objectives of the course were similar to those employed in action research studies (Bell, 1993), and were: (1) to allow mixed groups of students from a mainstream school and a school for the blind to produce and exhibit artworks that were appreciable by all people; (2) to work together as a team to translate the form of an exhibit of their choice, reinterpreting its visual form through their chosen tastes, smells, textures, sounds, and the recreation of its image; and (3) to increase an understanding of impairment in mainstream students and to increase the self-esteem of visually impaired students in art lessons by providing them with a good experience of art. To measure these objectives verbal feedback was collected from students and staff as the course progressed.

Students: During the classes and the later exhibition, the students from both schools appeared to concentrate on their tasks during

all four stages of the making process, showed significant enthusiasm for their topics, and took the project beyond their set school periods. On reflection, the teachers were also pleased with the way that the students interacted with each other, despite an initial reluctance to communicate or stand in the same groups. It was felt by the teachers that this was based on age difference and school background as Orchard House was a primary institution and Dorton House an upper school. The most notable comments from the Orchard House students were about their disbelief that Dorton House students were disabled. Both sides appeared to learn about each other's schools and educational cultures as a result.

Rhetorically, the benefits to the students were judged to be largely successful by the participating teachers. Despite the problem of their initial uneasiness of working with those of a different age group and with students from different social backgrounds, the students eventually worked well together, made corporate decisions, and created a single holistic artwork which received a positive reception at the eventual exhibition—each of which were subsequently requested by the Royal National Institute for the Blind for display in their offices. More particularly, the team members showed a great deal of flexibility in their approach to their art making tasks, taking considerable risks and attempting new techniques. The ability to take risks was also helped by the lack of formal assessment for the project—an unforeseen advantage of the unofficial nature of running the course.

Teachers: On reflection, the biggest challenge that the teachers faced, and only overcame with considerable persuasion, was what appeared to be administrative skepticism or apathy towards running a project without traditional quantitatively assessable outcomes. The teachers encouraged the schools' heads and senior teachers to attend the exhibition and affirm their students' work; as a result some were sympathetic and gave tacit verbal support. However, it was also mentioned that there appeared to be a sense of uneasiness at this level about the time taken out of the normal school days and changes to the students' normal working patterns.

Addressing the Problems: Teachers at both schools highlighted to their respective senior managers the extraordinary opportunity that their students would have to experience their work being exhibited at a renowned cultural institution. They also highlighted the other less tangible benefits to their students' art education, such as the understanding of disabilities not normally associated with arts practices, the self-esteem of the visually impaired students, and the chance for students from a mainstream school and a school for the blind to meet each other. The transport to and from the museum and gallery was also presented as a significant issue to be negotiated, which was eventually addressed with detailed written proposals and risk assessments (Hayhoe, 2012). Despite this, the schools involved did not continue this form of course in their teaching. However, BlindArt continued with similar initiatives, as discussed below.

Follow-up Courses: The long terms effects of this project did not reflect its proposed outcomes or teaching aims, but did reflect funding issues and the lack of fecundity that arts charities are exposed to in their projects. BlindArt, however, took this project further and developed a new four senses project (renamed 4senses) with a new team and new schools in the following academic year (BlindArt, 2006a). This project kept the original structure developed in its first phases (i.e. breaking the teaching into an awareness task, visiting a gallery, constructing the pieces, and staging a final exhibition in London) with a local school for students with multiple disabilities, including visual impairment, and a mainstream school in London.

The second 4Senses project also partnered with the Sense2Sense project (BlindArt, 2006b); kept the same format in its discrete stages and philosophy; and involved a local mainstream school, a local school for the blind, and another gallery in London. The main difference in this Sense2Sense course, however, was the partnering of individual blind and sighted students, rather than groups of students. This course appeared to be popular with its participants, and its report showed that all students achieved high standards in their pieces and gained largely positive learning experiences, with strong social and academic bonds being formed as a result. However, a key difference in the course appeared to be the relationship between the students, with the sighted students giving the descriptions and leading the visually impaired students, rather than giving the lead to the visually impaired students involved. This is reflected in its review of this project.

Sense2Sense was therefore a valuable experience for the visually impaired participants who got the opportunity to experience artworks directly through touch and the benefit of having artworks explained by their sighted peers. The sighted children benefited from visual impairment training and had a unique opportunity to learn how to guide visually impaired people. An unexpected benefit was that many of the children formed strong bonds of friendship, and will stay in touch long after the end of the project. Sense2Sense therefore provided not only a unique experience and life-long skills for the children involved, but also helped to forge new friendships. We are confident that the children will continue to be involved with the visual arts, creatively and receptively. (BlindArt, 2006b: para. 4)

The following year represented the final competition and annual exhibition by BlindArt, after which these new courses were discontinued. It seemed that the access departments at the museums and galleries involved did not want to continue these courses independently of BlindArt, which had been the main fulcrum of the project. Therefore, it was not educational reasons that led to the discontinuation of the projects, but the lack of administration and co-ordination of the various groups involved.

Future Improvements: The primary improvement needed in the course is the follow-up and assessment of the long-term learning objectives. In particular, because of the nature of the schools, which placed a significant emphasis on quantitative assessment within traditional short-term frameworks, the teachers were unable to accurately measure the increased understanding of visual impairment among the sighted students, the increased understanding of mainstream arts education among the visually impaired students, and whether all students had developed increased self-esteem as a result of the course. Thus future courses using a similar model need to have an enhanced element of evaluation of student attitudes.

An element of the course that was unsuccessful and unforeseen was the significant reluctance of school administrators to attempt a new form of art teaching and the hesitation of other schools and museum access departments to continue this experience without input from charities such as BlindArt. Consequently it seemed that there was no scope within the life of the schools to include freer forms of artistic and creative experimentation. If time could be given for mainstream student visits to museums and galleries, which have no assessed educational outcomes, then it is arguable that the same consideration could be given to more far-reaching art courses such as this one in future.

Conclusion

The course was largely successful when judging the outcomes against its original aims. However, a lack of assessment was only part of the reason for the reluctance of the senior management. There was also an unwillingness to try any form of new endeavor

that may cause problems and which could be embarrassing to such sensitive social issues. It is unfortunate that too many schools' curricula have become stretched by the need to develop more homogeneous assessments of art tasks, and that many similar courses remain unrepeated in access departments either because of a lack of will to change their attitudes towards inclusion or a lack of funding. Although, as it has been done once, support and interest from a number of other organizations, both at home and abroad has been gained for similar educational experiments. Thus perhaps the biggest bar to designing and implementing such courses in our current educational environment is the fear of unknown or different ideas; but when precedence is set, it would seem that administrators are often more willing to take risks in the promotion of such experimental pedagogy.

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