Chapter 8

Young People, Digital Cameras, and Art Gallery Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Young people can take meaningful photographs and are thus capable users of handheld digital technology such as digital cameras. When their digital photographs are paired with their narratives (creating visual narratives) an intertextuality becomes evident whereby the child’s voice is honored. By positioning children as capable photographers who generate images to share their lived experiences, this chapter describes a project (called Ways of Seeing) that was interested in how visual narratives could support participatory learning in an art gallery setting. Johnson, Adams & Witchey (2011) trends for 2011 – 2016 identify six emerging technology topics that resonate well with the projects aims and offer several concrete examples of how technology is used in museums and galleries. They believe that digital technology embedded with a contemporary context reflects the reality of education needs, learning and teaching. It is from this perspective that this chapter shares a project that builds on these notions and shares how a digital camera can be used in the gallery space with young people. A visual narrative of the method and a content analysis of the digital images generated by the young people is presented. This chapter demonstrates how it is possible to take digital technology such as digital cameras and embed them into gallery education programs with young people.

INTRODUCTION

Galleries are now actively concentrating on enriching the total gallery experience for visitors, and as McIntrye & Murphy (2011) reiterate are “tailoring new kinds of social experience for visitors to exhibitions” (p. 4). In addressing this focus, mobile devices, interfaces and connection with websites are becoming more embedded and networked, and are thus changing the experience of visiting galleries (Johnson, Adams & Witchey, 2011; Dixon, 2011). The interaction with digital technologies offers and provides more flexible and personalized information and encourages interaction and discussion between visitors, gallery staff and artists (Becker, 1995; O’Brien, Djusipov & Wittlin, 2007).
The impact of these changes for gallery education staff in these settings allows for new and innovative exploration (Chamberlain, 2011; McIntyre, & Murphy, 2011; Johnson, Adams & Witchey, 2011; Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport, 2011). Digital technology is challenging the way gallery education programs (both public and school programs) support exploration and discovery especially with the development of mobile technology. This way of working and engaging with meaning making has become very important to gallery educators and many are exploring how digital and communication technologies can be developed to offer visitors a more interactive, personalized gallery and art museum experience (Mackey, Adams, & Focus, 2010; Chamberlain, 2011; Dixon, 2011). The digital camera is seen as one technology that can be used in this space to enable the interaction with young people on school organized visits. This is one aspect that the Ways of Seeing pilot project aimed to investigate.

This chapter explores a project called Ways of Seeing that aimed to investigate how mobile digital technology such as digital cameras can be embedded into the education programs of a major gallery, the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Melbourne, Australia. In valuing the digital camera as a technology that can assist with inquiring into art, artists and the art spaces, young people aged 8 to 12 years were seen as capable photographers and users of mobile digital technology. In accordance with the NGV Schools strategic planning for (2011-2013), this pilot project aimed to establish possibilities for young people to use digital technology to record their learning as visual narratives in gallery-based learning programs, enhance engagement with art knowledge, understanding, meaning making and the NGV as an art space. It was also hoped that collaborating with young people and encouraging them to generate images of their gallery visit would provide feedback on experiences to influence future learning, planning and development within gallery education programs. Most specifically the digital camera became a communicative tool to transform the listening process and to support both students and educators (gallery and school teachers) to ask questions, inquire, set goals, and undertake reflective and metacognitive processes of self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-assessment. Thus this pilot project sought to understand from multiple perspectives how young people and children understand their gallery learning experiences.

In this chapter a visual essay is presented that captures the stages of the project. Following this is a content analysis of students’ photographs (from just one cycle of the project) and is provided to give insights into what the students generated while in the gallery space. This provides opportunity to consider how focused young people are when they are given the chance to engage with digital technology while inquiring into art, artists and art spaces with open ended student centered learning activities.

BACKGROUND

Gallery as a Learning Environment

The way individuals behave in a gallery is not fixed and thus informs continued adjustment in response to the emerging internal and external priorities. This includes those assumptions, initiatives and policies placed upon the gallery by addressing the needs of young people. In inviting viewers to engage with, and at times interact with art works modes of walking and looking have had to be re-tuned in accordance with changing practices of curtaining displays (Leahy, 2012; Simon, 2010). In considering this, the gaze of the viewer can be prolonged, disinterested, focused, aloof, detached, quick or even one that captures the viewers’ interest for multiple views from a variety of standpoints. When in the gallery space, not one of these perspectives is right or wrong, but in acknowledging this, there have been many
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