

They Are “Content to Play”: Creating Responsive Interactive Spaces

Cynthia Moreno, Curator of Education, Speed Art Museum
Beverly Dywan, Exhibit designer, Design in Three Dimensions



Girl with red paint
(Photo credit: Speed Art Museum)

Introduction

Today as we prepare a new Art Sparks Interactive Gallery at the Speed Art Museum, we are reflecting on our “cycle of learning” over the last eight years. As educators and designers, we have been co-learners in the process of developing our vision for Art Sparks. As we build on this learning in the development of the renovated gallery, we draw inspiration from a variety of streams. These include visitor feedback and evaluation, the original objects, and our practical experiences as an educator and as a designer developing participatory exhibits. We have drawn from the pedagogy of child development theorists and pioneering work being done by our colleagues. We have also learned from the art-centered approaches and natural material usage found in the Infant Preschools of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy and the Waldorf school movement.

The goals of Art Sparks are to provide children and families with an interactive introduction to art and the museum’s collection and to cultivate a habit of lifelong learning in museums, with emphasis on attracting visitor interest and curiosity.

Being responsive to visitor feedback and observation has been a key element of our process in both the original Art Sparks installation and the current renovation. Since we developed the concepts for Art Sparks eight years ago, there is new research on brain development and a new emphasis on informal learning in and through museums. The presence of regular family visitors with double strollers and young voices has transformed our museum into a more family focused institution. Signs of success include increased family visitation and a strong desire by staff and families for more multiple learning approaches within the permanent collection galleries.

What follows are some approaches that we have found to be central to the process of creating rich social experiences within art museums. These dimensions are important to cultivate active family engagement, repeat visitation, and the habit of lifelong learning.



Boy playing with sand
(Photo credit: Ruben Moreno)

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.”
Pablo Picasso

Elliot Eisner, in his book *Creation of Mind*, talks about the strong parallels between the art maker and the artwork, and children’s’ play. Both the artist at work and children at play demonstrate an “artful mind,” an open, creative, and receptive state that provides permission and freedom to explore and fully immerse into the sensory experience. Creating an environment to support that “state” of mind is what we have focused on in Art Sparks.

Our model of learning is a child-centered approach focused on hands-on and minds-on discovery. Our intent is to let families use sensory play to explore art and ideas in a context-rich environment.

Art Sparks is based on a constructivist learning model. This open-ended approach allows families to create their personal meanings for their interactions and their own artful experience.



Patterns of the Plains: A child provides a creative response to a pattern-making activity (Photo credit: Ruben Moreno)

This approach also naturally fosters collaboration and improvisation. The visitor drives their experience when they are interacting with original objects and learning areas, with a variety of outcomes. The interaction in the exhibits is often derived from symbolism that the art objects present.

Museum educators and designers know that family visits to museums are essentially social experiences and that some of our most powerful learning happens when families are together enjoying their experience. By designing collaborative learning areas we can foster interaction between families as well as those instant playmates that children spontaneously play with in a gallery setting. Offering this kind of socially mediated learning means that families will be more active and verbal and requires that exhibits to be designed for groups, rather than one or two people.

Critics of interactive approaches often say that interactivity will over-stimulate children, making them too excited to absorb their experiences. In working through the floor plan of exhibits, we arrange the types of experiences strategically. Modulating the balance of "cool," "warm," and "hot" activities helps families to avoid over-stimulation.

Examples of this balance include:

Cool: quiet, focused, and cognitive activities: puzzles and building activities

Warm: interpersonal activities that multiple people can do together

Hot: very popular activities that are either kinesthetic, or involve media or software

Transitional zones also help ease the visitor from the traditional, non-touch galleries into the participatory gallery. In the Speed's *Harmonic Sound Corridor*, the visitors move through the bodies trigger a sequence of sounds and harmonic half tones



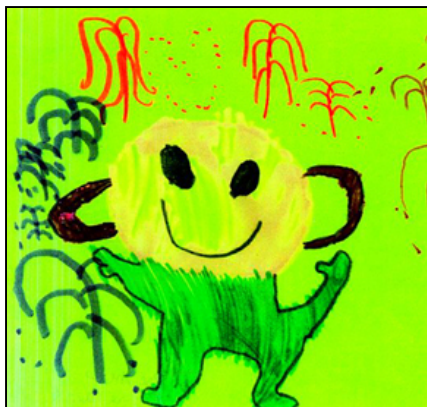
**Transition Zone: *Harmonic Sound Corridor* entry into Art Sparks
(Composer: Chris Dahlgren; Photo credit: Kenneth Hayden)**

It is important to design layers of activities for multi-aged groups so that families can stay together as part of their visit. Equally important is using self-evident or intuitive criteria for most interactive activities that can be understood even by non-readers. As part of an effort to provide a safe and comfortable experience we have worked to provide good sightlines so that caregivers can keep track of where children are and vice versa.

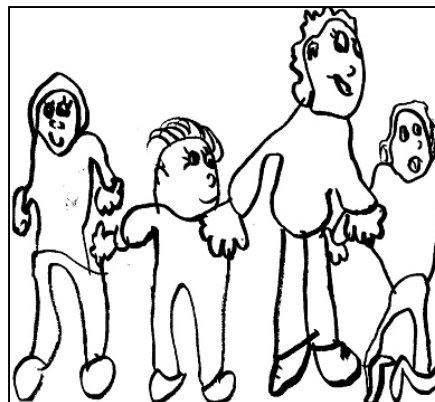
Assessing our outcomes

Working with the Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI), we built evaluation into our process when we constructed Art Sparks seven years ago. We wanted to more clearly understand the learning that visitors were having and the connections they were making so we could share this information with donors. We have included evaluation and listening activities in the recent pre-design phase to help create our vision; in our pre-fabrication phase to try out exhibit concepts with visitors; and as part of our post-opening assessment to articulate value, and develop a framework of understanding while assessing engagement levels and dwell time. We have continued our evaluation and visitor feedback efforts and have used them as an ongoing way to get the visitor voice and the staff wisdom incorporated into our design process over time.

In the exploratory evaluation after the gallery opened, we used personal meaning maps with visitors to understand their experiences. In order to occupy young children while the adults created the personal meaning maps, we had them create drawings before and after their visits. What emerged was a rich source of information about the learning by young children in the gallery.



Pre-Visit:
Green Monster drawn by a 6-year-old visitor



Post visit:
 “My favorite thing about visiting was being together with my family.”

Working with ILI staff, we used visitor responses to develop a framework of thematic clusters. The clusters revealed an expansion of visitor understanding and perceptions. Visitors responded to: social learning component /memory making experience; the physical space and the freedom to provide for exploration; and the personal connections visitors make between art and their lives. (Adams, 1999)

Some feedback

Visitors described visits as:

- “Meaningful and memorable”
- “A safe comfortable and a place to be creative”
- “A place to be with my family”

Fifty-five per cent showed engagement levels of high to moderately high with dwell times of 45+ minutes and a pattern of repeat visitation.

What we have discovered in our recent research with families both of current users in Art Sparks (Adams, 2004), and potential visitors, (inclined and disinclined visitors) in the permanent collection (Korn, 2004) is:

- 1) Parents want more support and resources to introduce their children to art.
- 2) Families want more opportunities for creative self-expression.
- 3) Families want more museum amenities.

To address these needs, we are adding more linked activities that will connect the experience between specific Art Sparks activity centers and selected objects found within the permanent collection. We are working on paths of discovery within the various galleries that will encourage families to travel into the galleries, find an object that intrigues them, and to come to the Art Sparks to do more multi-sensory learning. We are currently piloting in-gallery family interpretative activities for the museum’s permanent collection. Within Art Sparks we are developing an expanded Planet Preschool discovery area, and adding new areas for creative expression in both Art Sparks and the permanent collection. As Art Sparks enters this next phase we will be watching our visitors and assessing our results. Stay tuned.

References

- Adams, M. (1999). Summative evaluation report for Art Learning Center, Art Sparks Interactive Gallery, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY (unpublished report). Annapolis, MD: Institute for Learning Innovation.
- Adams, M., Moreno, C., Polk, M., Buck L. (2003). The dilemma of interactive art museum Spaces. *Art Education, The Journal of the National Art Education Association*, 56.
- Adams, M. and Kaul, V. (2004). Visitor and staff survey, Art Sparks Interactive Gallery, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY (unpublished report). Annapolis, MD: Institute for Learning Innovation.
- Korn, R. (2004). Ways of knowing art and art museums, audience research results from one-on-one interviews with parents, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY (unpublished report). New York City, NY: Randi Korn and Associates.