Empathy is a declining skill.

Problem & Impact

Lower empathy impacts society by increasing the risk of:
- Intolerance
- Aggression
- Political Gridlock
- Social Distress
- Discrimination
- Bullying
- Suicide

Opportunity

Empathy is a “muscle” that can be honed.

(Gokcigdem, 2016, p. xxvi)

Big Idea: Use studio art glass and participatory techniques to address the empathy deficit.

Framing

Exhibition

Exhibition at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma Washington (MOG).

This exhibition is not about art. It is about people.

Because MOG’s Grand Hall is a vast space which functions as the museum’s main lobby, each exhibit area had to stand on its own and be visited in any order. I created the construct of a buffet table of art for visitors to sample using their feelings, identities, memories and imagination. In each section, visitors are invited to select a piece of art to “taste” and then answer some questions as they reflect on their experience. The questions are intended to do the following:

1) Create a personal connection. (What this means to me)
2) Flip the visitor’s perspective. (Imagine what this means to others)
3) Encourage sharing. (Write, vote, tell)
4) Make visitor narratives available to provide additional perspectives.

Exhibit

The Participatory Museum.


Literature – What We Know

ABOUT MUSEUMS AND EMPATHY

- Museums, as sale and informal learning platforms, are uniquely equipped to encourage visitors to imagine, explore, and experience empathy first hand.
- Museums can foster empathy by providing opportunities and frameworks for visitors to “experience an emotional connection and at the same time have the freedom to arrive at their own conclusions.” (Potash, 2016, p. 79)
- Guided relational viewing is a technique used to foster empathy (3 steps):
  - Ask visitors to identify one artwork or object that is personally meaningful to them
  - Visitors create a response art based upon thoughts or feelings evoked by their selection
  - Visitors are invited to reflect through individual writing

ABOUT PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

- Objects that are personal vs. stories
- Asking Visitor questions and prompting them to share their reactions to the objects
  - activates art as social objects.
- Kinds of questions to generate authenticity, confident, and diverse responses:
  1. Q. that help visitors connect their own experiences to the objects on display (personal questions).
  2. Q. that ask visitors to imagine scenarios involving objects or ideas that are foreign to their experience (speculative questions).
- Two characteristics of successful questions:
  1. Are open to a diversity of responses (no right answer)
  2. Draw on visitor experience; visitor feels capable of answering.

Nancy Callan (American, born 1964); Alex Stisser (American, born 1974); Paul Marioni (American, born 1941); Oben Abright (American, born 1980);

Preparatory Testing

Because the museum was closed, informal testing was done with family, friends and museum staff to provide data to help with the selection of art. The intent was to try to identify art which generated emotion or stories. Later informal testing was done to help refine my visitor questions.

Exam:

- Testing of art did not surface obvious front runners. Highest ranked art varied with every measure investigated.
- Testing of questions did serve to eliminate questions and helped me to appreciate the time commitment required from respondents.

Testing

Exhibition

Collection of Museum of Glass, gift of the artist (VA.2016.6)

Empathy Through Museums

https://www.aam.org/museum/2019/november/demystifying-empathy/

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