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The Language of Living:
Developing Intelligent Novices
at The Suter Art Gallery

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Esther Helen McNaughton

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Abstract

This research was founded in Bruer's (1993, p.15) concept of the intelligent novice, considering students visiting an art gallery could be so described. He defines intelligent novices as "people who learn new fields and solve novel problems more expertly than most, regardless of how much domain-specific knowledge they possess. Among other things, intelligent novices seem to control and monitor their thought processes". Peckham's (1965) 'cognitive dissonance' is related, describing how some novice learners respond in cognitively threatening situations. These theories are augmented by Efland's (2002) exploration into art and cognition, in particular, the concepts of 'ill-structured cognitive domains' and 'cognitive flexibility'. Drawing on and reconceptualising these theories, this research addresses how the art gallery environment helps students become intelligent novices.

The case study focuses on the researcher's education programmes located at The Suter, Te Aratoi a Whakatu, Nelson, New Zealand's oldest public art gallery, established in 1898. This cross-disciplinary research bridges education and museum studies, and is action-based using mixed-methods. Through a process of journaling, observing, discussing, dialoguing, audio and video recording, as well as collecting and analysing documents including students' work, the researcher considered how young students develop as intelligent novices. She found that their learning in the art gallery was enhanced by three interrelated factors: the individual's agency, physical aspects of the art gallery, and the community of practice which developed around class visits, each essential to the development of the intelligent novice. A framework was developed to support art museum educators in facilitating these attributes.

The thesis suggests that:

Intelligent novices independently make effective connections between prior learning and novel situations;

Within the art gallery as an ill-structured domain, the art gallery educator works with communities of practice to support development of intelligent novices;

Repeat gallery visits enable students and communities of practice to practise particular strategies in order to develop as intelligent novices.

Intelligent novices flourish when all members of the communities of practice demonstrate such characteristics.

It concludes that, due to the 'ill-structured' nature of the art gallery environment, and its cultural role in society, the role of the intelligent novice is as active cultural transformer.

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Heartfelt thanks also go to the students and families of Lesley Kotua's classes in 2008 and 2009. Their willingness to be involved has allowed an insight into a fascinating, under-researched aspect of education, and it was with great pleasure that I was able to explore in detail the process of these particular children and their families learning at The Suter.

Finally I would like to express my gratitude to The Suter, in particular, the director, Julie Catchpole, for their support in this research.

Approval for research has been obtained from the appropriate University Ethics Committee for the experiments described in the thesis. The pilot stage of the research was considered low risk and was recorded on the Low Risk Database which was reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committees 2008. The second phase of the research, the video discussions: "The video research, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B Application 08/47" was granted ethics approval on 10 November 2008.

Readers Notes

The citation within this study follows the convention of giving page numbers for direct quotes, and author followed by date for general references.

All participants' names, except that of Esther and Lesley, have been changed for the purpose of anonymity.

This study refers to The Suter as an art gallery; theorists cited, however, at times refer to such institutions as art museums, or simply museums. For the purpose of this study art gallery is synonymous with the term art museum.

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