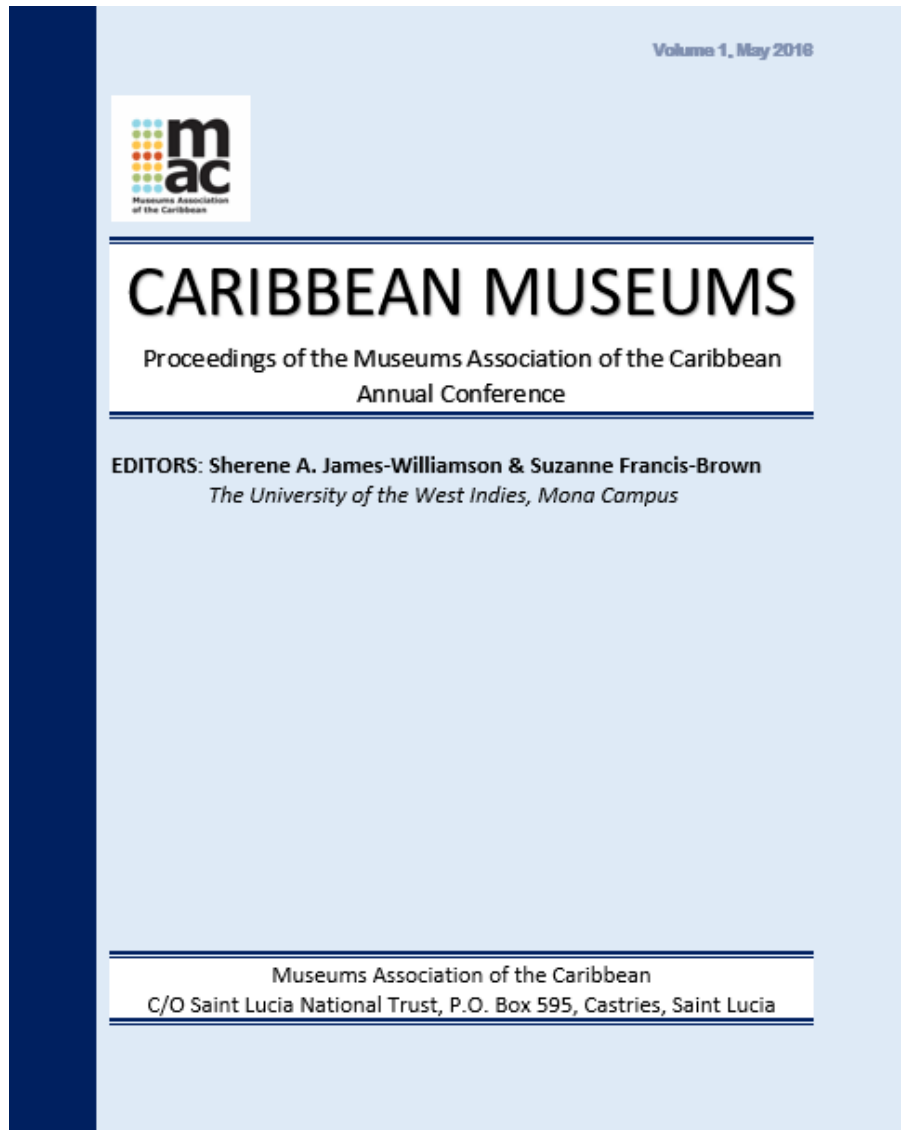


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Developing Cross Curricular Learning Opportunities at the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands

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ABSTRACT. Over the past few decades the shifting role of museums from guarded repositories to accessible learning centres has transformed the way they are used by educators. Rather than venues for the occasional field trips, museums are increasingly being recognized as effective places to enrich learning for students on an ongoing basis via collections that represent tangible examples of what is being taught in the classroom. Further, the evidence for engaging students in learning through the arts is consistent and increasing internationally.

In 2012 when the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands (NGCI) moved into a new purpose-built facility, this premise was used to inform a full review of the education department and to determine how this art museum might offer programming that directly supported the Cayman Islands National Curriculum (Key Stages 1-5). This case study explores the development and implementation of the cross-curricular education initiative - dubbed “Active Learning Sessions” (ALS) - that grew out of these discussions. It traces the initial consultation period with key project stakeholders; the research phase where key themes and topics for primary and secondary levels were considered; and ultimately the piloting of sessions based on art, literacy, numeracy, materials, Caymanian heritage and national symbols.

Keywords: museum education, art museum, cultural education, cross-curricular learning, arts.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades we have witnessed the transformation of museums from guarded repositories to accessible learning centres where vibrant education programmes are considered to be as integral as acquisition and scholarship. Importantly, this shifting role of the museum has also transformed the way these institutions are used by educators. Rather than a one-off field trip, museums are increasingly being recognized as effective places to enrich learning for

students on an ongoing basis, helping schools achieve their own learning objectives. A US 2013 survey of the ways in which museums and libraries support life-long learners concluded that “supporting development of executive function and ‘deeper learning’ skills through literacy and STEM-based experiences” and “increasing high-quality learning experiences” were key outcomes [Howard, 2013, 15-25]. This was further reinforced in a report on Cultural Education in England, commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the

Department for Education, which listed museums visits, among other forms of cultural education, as helping students to “think both creatively and critically and to express themselves fully” [Henley, 2012, 17]. The evidence for engaging students in learning through the arts is consistent and increasing internationally.

In 2012 when the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands (NGCI) moved into a new purpose-built facility, this premise was used to inform a full review of the education department and to determine how this art museum might offer programming that directly supported the Cayman Islands National Curriculum (Key Stages 1-5). This paper explores the development and implementation of the cross-curricular education initiative - dubbed “Active Learning Sessions” (ALS) - that grew out of these discussions. It traces the initial consultation period with key project stakeholders; the research phase where key themes and topics for primary and secondary levels were considered; and ultimately the piloting of sessions based on art, literacy, numeracy, materials, Caymanian heritage and national symbols.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Created in 1997, NGCI was conceived to be part art museum and part educational centre charged with “promoting the appreciation and practice of the visual arts” [NGCI Law, 1999] in the Cayman Islands. This dual role reflected the relative infancy of the visual arts in the islands. Until the 1950s, Cayman had existed as a hardworking, conservative society whose people had carved out an existence from seafaring, turtling and other related activities. The tough physical and economic climate rarely

afforded residents the luxury of free time to dedicate to creating art for art’s sake. Instead, the early forms of cultural expression were functional crafts such as basket weaving and roofing, embroidery, appliqué, smocking, and quilting along with fiddle music, quadrille dance, architectural fretwork, and shell and wood carving.

In the 1960s the increasing affluence generated by the growth in the financial services and tourism industries began to transform the social, political, and cultural profile of the islands, with the arts flourishing as a result. In 1984 the first national cultural entity was formally created – the Cayman National Cultural Foundation, followed in by the Cayman Islands National Museum in 1990, and the NGCI in 1997.

At its inception, NGCI worked out of a temporary 2500 square foot space and initially focused on temporary exhibitions of local and international fine art along with art classes and workshops which were housed offsite in school classrooms and other borrowed facilities. The curatorial and education departments were given equal weight within the organizational structure, and received equal staffing and financial resources.

By the mid-2000s NGCI was running 20+ art classes per month filling a critical gap for arts education within the wider community. Programmes included on-site weekly workshops for youth, adults, seniors and persons with disabilities in addition to off-site programmes for persons struggling with substance abuse and the incarcerated. The pace was exhausting for the small team of six fulltime staff members and by 2011, when in the wake of the economic crisis funding was retracted by both public and private sector partners, it

was time to review the approach. Further, while youth and adult programmes were well-attended, NGCI struggled to fully connect to their primary audience – local public and private schools, and especially those schools in the outer districts and Sister Islands.

In 2012, NGCI moved to a new purpose-built facility. The 9,000 square foot building housed a temporary gallery, art studio, library, auditorium, sculpture garden, art café and gift shop. Most importantly, it included the first ever permanent gallery for the National Collection of art which opened up opportunities for collections-based learning dramatically. As the collection represented tangible examples of what was being taught in the classroom, this was recognized as a particularly effective resource through which to enrich learning and inspire students – if they could be gotten through the door.

Historically, this had been problematic. The Cayman Islands National Curriculum is conservative and exam driven, focusing heavily on traditional academic subjects. Teachers are charged with packing an enormous amount into the school year leaving an hour per week, at best, for art time that was usually devoted to drawing and colouring or craft work. Many of the teachers that were canvased felt that they lacked the knowledge to explore beyond these boundaries, several felt intimidated, while others had concerns about using messy materials in their classrooms.

Schools did visit NGCI temporary exhibitions but these field trips were generally considered to be a treat at the end of the school year, rather than a serious learning opportunity. Further, these visits were restricted by funding

and transportation challenges which resulted in an unbalanced public/private school visiting ratio.

Staff recognized that they were missing a huge opportunity to connect. A trip to NGCI used up precious teaching hours so it had to count beyond simply giving students a firsthand experience of art. To get teachers to commit to visiting, programmes would need to be useful and relevant. This meant ensuring that: a) the programme offered would directly support the school curriculum thereby helping teachers across a variety of core subjects rather than “adding” additional work; b) funding was secured to provide the programme free of charge and to help with transportation to and from schools at no cost; and c) follow-up teacher resources and classroom materials would be accessible via the NGCI website,.

3. CONSULTATION PHASE

To address these objectives the NGCI Active Learning Sessions programme was developed. Using the National Art Collection as a resource through which to support the learning objectives identified in the National Curriculum for Key Stages 1 through 5, with a particular focus on the core skills of literacy and numeracy, ALS would provide new interactive and visual learning avenues not normally available within a classroom setting. Further, ALS would be designed to provide a creative platform for children to “gain knowledge through the learning of facts; understanding through the development of their critical faculties, and new skills through the opportunity to practice.” (Henley, 2012. p. 12)

Programme objectives were:

1. To link the permanent collection to the National Curriculum for five distinct age groups;

2. To ensure Active Learning Sessions were educational, enjoyable, and delivered at a high standard and that curriculum links are meaningful and appealing to schools and teachers;

3. That in addition to core curriculum subjects, ALS would serve to develop the pupils' understanding of Cayman's art and heritage;

4. To remove any barriers schools may have to visiting the Gallery; and

5. To ensure that sessions were well promoted to schools, encouraging an increase in bookings from Government schools across the Cayman Islands. (Copley, 2013. pg 2)

Funds for the project development were secured via a local foundation, DART CAYMAN and a project manager was employed for three months to lead the research and community consultation phase and to ultimately develop five sessions for a range of age groups and academic levels. The initial mapping exercise began with our familiarization with the National Curriculum, specifically looking at the brand new Cayman Islands Early Years Curriculum, the Primary and Secondary segment, and the GCSE/CXC Art and Design specification. Key themes and topics at each level were considered. The project manager then worked with the chief curator and education manager to identify suitable art on display that would best illustrate the selected themes and provide meaningful links to learning.

This initial phase was followed by a consultation period where the project manager met with representatives from local schools, the Head of the Early Years Unit, and Senior Curriculum Development Officers from the Ministry of Education to ensure that teacher and school priorities were reflected in the new

sessions and to discuss any barriers to visiting.

NGCI staff then met with the chief officer for the Ministry of Education and other Ministry curriculum specialists in an effort to secure their expertise and to seek their formal endorsement of the programme. These meetings emphasized the importance of creating interactive sessions that focused on talking, expressing, listening and verbal communication during the reception year, then moving on to literacy and numeracy in Key Stage 1 and 2, with more specific art-related learning in the secondary sessions. It was agreed that all sessions would use investigative learning approaches. The suitability of the planned session beyond the Cayman Island's Government curriculum was also discussed for schools which used the US curriculum, something that had not previously been considered.

The next phase of the project was the development of the five Active Learning Sessions and related resources. All information gathered during phase one contributed to the development of each session.

4. DEVELOPMENT PHASE

Each ALS session was created to meet the curriculum requirements of a specific age group between Key Stages 1-5, and to draw upon core skills that were being taught at each level. The Early Years session, for example, focused primarily on communicating thoughts and feelings about the subjects and colours; primary classes learn about adjectives that describe art, materials that are used to create art and the difference between two dimensional and three dimensional pieces; for older students sessions would be linked to the exam specifications for subject of Art and Design. Importantly, for the latter group,

projects would also be geared towards portfolio development and would contribute towards the final examination grade.

Finally, NGCI educators felt that it was important that sessions be interactive, with pupils taking an active role in the learning process via interactive activities, scavenger hunts, class presentations, and Q&A sessions.

5. THE SESSIONS

The Early Years session (pre-school) focuses on the development of conversational skills and language, as outlined in the newly developed Early Years Curriculum. Subsequently, this session starts and ends with an interactive and lively story where children are encouraged to contribute to the story telling. An NGCI educator then leads the students on an “animal hunt” around the Gallery and encourages them to describe the animals they find e.g. How many legs? What colour is it? What would its coat feel like? Materials are provided so to stimulate what each animal would feel like. Children use observation skills (sight, sound and touch) to investigate the gallery and are encouraged to ask questions and use deduction. Listening and responding to a final story helps to recap on their visit and consolidate learning.

Key topics and skills learned:

- The opportunity to learn the foundations of conversation through shared stories that require interaction;
- Expansion of vocabulary;
- Taking part in making, finding and investigating activities;
- Making links and developing ideas;
- Practicing listening and responding; and

- Developing sequencing skills by talking about past and present events.

The Key Stage 1 session begins with the students looking carefully at a large landscape painting featuring local animals, customs and past times. This is followed by a scavenger hunt where they are tasked with finding similar images in other artworks on display. The class are then seated to discuss what they have seen, each selecting a word card that best describes how they feel about their chosen artwork and sharing this with their classmates. The final activity allows each child to identify another artwork that they like and to draw this onto a postcard, using another word card to describe it. These postcards can be taken back to school to be displayed as a reminder of their visit.

Key curriculum links and skills:

Visual Arts:

- Exploring and responding to sensory experiences and to memory and imagination;
- Talking about their own and other people’s work, for example how they made their work and how they feel about other people’s work;
- Developing creativity and imagination by exploring visual, tactile, sensory qualities of materials; and
- Investigating different kinds of art, craft and design.

Literacy:

- Using adventurous language and expressing preferences.

Science:

- Recognizing and naming common materials and understanding their uses.

Numeracy:

- Describing properties of 2D and 3D shapes.

History:

- Finding out about the past through different sources.



Figure 1: Cayman Preparatory School students explore shapes in Key Stage 1 session.

The Key Stage 2 & 3 (comb.) session begins by observing watercolour paintings in the Realism Corridor and comparing them with examples of more abstract work. Students are encouraged to share their preference and learn about the terms: figurative, semi-abstract and abstract. The class then works in small groups and are given cards showing well-known works of art for them to categorise using these terms. They also pick out their favourite pieces and look at and touch examples of oil, acrylic and watercolour paint. Students are then given the opportunity to begin writing a review of the gallery using some of the descriptive terms, which will be completed in the classroom.

Key curriculum links and skills:

Art and Design:

- Investigating art, craft and design in the locality and in a variety of genres, styles and traditions;
- Developing an understanding of how artists develop, express and represent their ideas; and
- Becoming familiar with a range of art, craft and design from the past and present and from different cultures.

English:

- Participating in group discussions and presentations;
- Broadening their vocabulary with critical terms; and
- Writing in ways that inform and explain; reviewing and commenting on what they have seen from their personal perspective.

Science:

- Comparing materials and objects on the basis of their material properties; and
- Describing changes that occur when materials are heated or cooled.



Figure 2: Exploring language and materials in a Key Stage 3 session

The final Key Stage 4 & 5 (comb.) session is directly related to the GCSE/CXC Art and Design qualification. Here students discuss what influences the work of the artists they are viewing and in turn identify

what influences their own work. The session also introduces art history and art theory through a more general gallery tour, and increased familiarity with the art of the Cayman Islands. Building on the critical language initially explored in Key Stage 3, students to explain both external and internal influences on the artist and how successful these have been. Students finish the session by sketching and taking photographs of their favourite pieces of art and commenting on what they mean to them personally. Completed work can be used as part of their portfolio submission for the GCSE/CXC qualification.

Key Art & Design specification links:

Art History:

- Developing cultural knowledge, understanding and application of art and craft in historical and contemporary contexts and societies;
- Developing the ability to evaluate how ideas, feelings and meanings are conveyed and interpreted in images and artefacts; and
- Understand how knowledge of the work of others can inform their own work.

Critical Analysis:

- Learning the wide variety of approaches and intentions practiced by contemporary, and their contribution to continuity and change in society;
- Recording experiences and observations in appropriate forms – undertaking research and gathering visual materials;
- Using primary and secondary sources; and
- Analyzing, discussing and evaluating images and their meanings. Making and recording independent judgments in visual and other forms.

6. OBSERVATIONS

The development phase of the project was

completed in Spring 2013, and each new session was in the Summer term in order to check that the timing and activities worked well, and that the objectives outlined in phase one were being achieved. This piloting stage also allowed for changes to be made if necessary, therefore ensuring the quality of sessions offered to schools was high and that sessions ran smoothly. In total, these new sessions were piloted by 153 children, from a diverse cross-section of public and private schools.

Give the historically slow take-up from schools, that feedback was unanimously positive was a surprise to staff. It was found that both public and private schools embraced the investigative learning approach that underpins ALS and felt that their students were inspired and energized by the Gallery visit:

“The activities were both enjoyable for students and highly appropriate to their current studies. Learning about 2D and 3D shapes fitted in perfectly with what the children learn in numeracy at school. This is an area that some of our pupils struggle with, but viewing it from an art perspective really consolidated their understanding. We’ll be booking to come every year.” KL, Deputy Head of Bodden Town Primary. (Copley, 2013)

“These are exactly the types of inquiry based learning activities that we want our children to do. The sessions fit in with what we are trying to achieve at Savannah.” BA, Principal, Savannah Primary School. (Copley, 2013)

“The children enjoyed the session and were still talking about it days later. I was impressed by the activities that looked at shapes and materials – it fitted in perfectly with the topics we’ve been covering in class” JA, Kindergarten Teacher, Cayman International School. (Copley, 2013)

“Thank you for a fantastic session. The students are still drawing on the bus – they say they feel inspired”, SM, Teacher, Cayman Islands Further Education College. (Copley, 2013)

Following several small adjustments to the timing of the Early Years and Key Stage 1 sessions, ALS was formally launched in Fall 2013.

7. CONCLUSIONS

At the time of writing the ALS programme has seen a total of 1,400 pre-school, primary and secondary participants in Grand Cayman and Cayman Brac. This is a 109% increase in school attendance in 2014, from the previous year, with a 60% repeat visitor rating. Further, these numbers indicate a growing interest in integrating arts-related education into the classroom experiences of students in the Cayman Islands as teachers are reaching out more frequently for exhibition tours, workshop opportunities, and classroom resources.

Other measurable outcomes included:

- The formal endorsement of the Ministry of Education;
- Being shortlisted for the Joanna Clarke Award for Excellence in Education – the first ever cultural project to be nominated;
- Receiving an invitation to present the project at the Cayman Islands Principals’ Annual Meeting;
- Receiving an invitation to provide professional development sessions for teachers at the Cayman Islands Education Conference; and
- Increased visibility for the National Art Collection leading to new donations of artwork and funding support.

In addition, indirect outcomes related to

NGCI’s wider mission to “promote and encourage the practice and appreciation of the visual arts” are being enhanced through ALS attendance including students growing up understanding and enjoying the art of the Cayman Islands and beyond, enhanced creativity, and a deeper connection to their heritage and cultural identity.

NGCI staff are now exploring ways to grow ALS and to address any challenges that school may still face in connecting to the programme. Feedback in evaluations gathered at the end of each session suggests that transportation is still a challenge for some schools, particularly in the outer islands; that teachers would like to have access to follow up materials for classroom activities; and that schools would like students to engage in a hands-on art activity during their tour. NGCI educators have also canvassed schools for other ALS “themes” that they wish to see developed.

While still in its infancy ALS has the potential to transform the way in which the National Gallery, and indeed other local cultural organizations, are used by the Cayman Islands community. The formal endorsement of NGCI by the Ministry of Education and Department of Education (note: the NGCI falls under the Ministry of Culture) had resulted in a dramatic increase in schools visits and educators are quickly realizing the benefits of utilizing cultural collections as a serious educational resource and an opportunity for hands-on investigative learning. Perhaps most importantly, by using this cross curricular learning approach to engage schools NGCI has been able to make a strong case for the wider Cultural Education and to advocate for increased commitment to this field at government level.



Figure 3: ALS has increased school visits by 109%. Here George Town Primary students enjoy a Key Stage 1 session.

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