‘It’s not like anything Joe and I have experienced before’: Family workshops at Tate Modern

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‘It’s not like anything Joe and I have experienced before’: family workshops at Tate Modern
Roger Hancock with Alison Cox and Synthia Griffin

Introduction

Tate Modern, a major national gallery of international modern and contemporary art, is located on the border of the London boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth and is close to the borough of Tower Hamlets. All three boroughs have some of the most diverse communities in the UK and contain areas of extreme social deprivation.

One of the major challenges for Tate Modern is to develop links with communities and groups that have not visited museums or art galleries, especially those living and working locally. The gallery’s family programme is one way in which it has approached this challenge. The programme is aimed both at first time and repeat visitors, and attracts families from all over London, the rest of the UK, and overseas. The programme offers a range of events, some book-able, some not, but all are free of charge. The gallery has proven to be a popular venue for family visitors and this is reflected in the success of ‘Start’ which uses games and other self-directed activities to introduce children and their accompanying adults to exhibited artworks.

Tate’s website also provides a welcome and suggestions to family groups for making the best use of the gallery. But clearly, such written guidance hopes that families are sufficiently confident to make a visit. Many local families, it seems, do not have this confidence and they continue to be under-represented in visitor surveys. These families feel Tate is not a place relevant to them, or they worry that prior knowledge of art and artists is important in order to use the gallery.

A second challenge for Tate Modern is to address the specific need for increased provision for children under five years, since experience suggests that provision for this age range is often poorly met by galleries. Like the majority of family events at Tate Modern, Start is aimed at children aged five to twelve years rather than those under five. Nevertheless, as well as bringing children within this age range, a substantial number of these families do bring children under five and some provision is made for them, for example there is a ‘soft trail’ and a simple sketch book with activities related to art works.
One way in which Tate has addressed these two needs is to provide specifically designed workshops for families with very young children. These – run as a series of three weekly workshops when families could attend all or some - first began in 2002 and are collectively known as ‘Small Steps in Big Space’.

**The workshops**

*Outreach to the local community*

Well before a ‘Small Steps’ workshop takes place, a local parent with a background in art and community participation is employed by Tate to visit nearby playgroups and libraries to spread the word and invite potential participants. This outreach work is conceived as a process rather than an event, however, in which this visit is only a beginning. Following this initial contact there is further consideration in terms of how best to make the journey to Tate and how to ensure that those parents who might be a little anxious are linked with others who are more confident travellers. Reassuring telephone calls are sometimes made and, where necessary, the outreach worker agrees to meet a group a parents on the morning of a workshop and accompany them to Tate.

Without wishing to patronise parents, it’s important to recognise that, for those unused to travelling with their children even a little way from their locality, an unfamiliar journey to a public gallery can present an obstacle. Despite such outreach understandings, there have been parents who said enthusiastically that they would like to come to a workshop who, on the day, did not actually make it. These parents serve to emphasise that outreach work is far from straightforward and highlight the complexity of increasing social inclusion in an art gallery.

*The nature of the workshops*

A workshop last for two hours and consists of the following structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.30</td>
<td>Welcome and refreshments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.40 -10.50</td>
<td>Warm up song/game/activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.50 – 11.10</td>
<td>Initial studio based activity linked to an overall theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.10 – 11.50</td>
<td>Gallery visit to look at selected art works linked to the theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.50 – 12.00</td>
<td>Return to the studio for refreshments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.00 - 12.30</td>
<td>Final studio activity linked to the overall theme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are approximate timings as each workshop needs to adjust to the specific needs and interests of parents and children who attend, and particularly their ability to move easily and safely from the art studio to the gallery and also around the gallery.
The artist educators who lead the workshops work to an overarching theme arising from, perhaps, two or three gallery exhibits and make decisions about how these art works might made interesting and meaningful to children and their parents. This interest is kindled through preliminary activities – playful songs, games, and exploratory tasks in the art studio; and then, on visiting the gallery itself, viewing and responding to what is seen there. This response can involve an art activity whilst sitting in front of an artwork, but sometimes participants might be ask just to look whilst, for instance, the artist educator tells a story related to the content of the exhibit.

Examples of themes that have been successfully used in workshops include:

1. ‘Making your mark’

   ![Figure 2 Learning in tandem](image1.png)

   ‘If you give adults a way of engaging with their child, you set up a circle of learning.’
   (Young, 2004)

   This workshop drew on the works of Lucio Fontana, Henri Matisse and Barbara Hepworth. The making your mark theme involved participants in sand drawings in the studio and a collage activity in the gallery based on Matisse’s ‘The Snail’.

2. ‘Topsy turvy world’

   ![Figure 3 Waiting for the performance](image2.png)

   (Concert for Anarchy, 1990, Rebecca Horn)

   A piano that doesn’t follow the rules. Every five minutes it unfolds, playing discordant music.
This workshop, in particular, used Rebecca Horn’s ‘Concert for Anarchy’ and, on return to the studio the participants used foam and card to make their own versions of Horn’s upside-down piano.

3. ‘Shapes in space’

In the gallery, this involved parents and children making shapes with their bodies around Umberto Boccioni’s bronze sculpture, a figure that is aerodynamically changed by speed.

*The art studio*

The art studio provides an important social base for workshop participants as well as place where activities related to the chosen art works can be done. Occasionally, when a child becomes tired in the gallery, a parent may feel that there’s a need to return to the studio given that it offers a more private and secure space. When children and parents engage well with an activity the art studio can be buzzing with creative energy and also enables ‘messy’ activities that could not be done on the gallery floor.

*Artist educator’s approach*

‘It’s very important that I am an artist and that I know something about how artists express things. An artist educator is a creative person wishing to educate others.’

(Artist educator, 30.3.07)
Since the inception of Small Steps in 2002, the group of artist educators who have led the many workshops to date have evolved a shared approach and practice which takes into account the needs of both adults and young children when learning together. There are four principles that guide their pedagogy:

- the selected art works always provide the main stimulus for the workshop activities and the focus of the learning;
- ‘plural responses’ and ‘open readings’ of artworks are expected and encouraged from children and adults;
- workshop activities like games, movement, music, drama, drawing and painting can help participants make their own conceptual links with art works;
- relaxed, socially inclusive and enjoyable workshops enable participants to interact and learn from the artist educators but also each other.

Underlying these principles is a theory of learning that places learners and their responses at the centre. As indicated above, there is a planned content to each workshop linked to specific art works, but the meaning of this content is not pre-defined nor ‘delivered’ to participants as appears to be the case with much of the curriculum in schools. The personal interpretations of parents and children are encouraged at all times and the artist educator is also a learner with members of a workshop as an ‘interpretive community’ (see Hooper-Greenhill, 2004).

**Participants’ responses**

Small Steps evaluations have involved collecting a range of data arising from end-of-session questionnaires to parents, parent comments during a workshop, in-depth telephone interviews, observations of children, photographs of workshops in process, and discussions with Tate artist educators, outreach worker, and curatorial staff (see Hancock et al, 2004; 2007). In the main, these have highlighted three areas of benefit.

Firstly, with regard to the children, there has been confirmation from parents that their children have become more confident at being in a large gallery and more able to look at specific art works and show interested in them.

It seems that we can safely assume that a sculpture has a pedagogical force but we cannot say exactly what its impact will be for those who relate to it.

The structure of the workshops (see table above) was considered by most parents to be very appropriate for their children and the flexibility of those running the sessions
was seen as essential to the inclusion of young children. Some parents reported that their children were helped, by this structure, to achieve in ways that were not expected. For instance, one parent said:

‘I was surprised at the way Fergus picked up on things during the workshops. I think it helped him to be part of a big group doing practical things together.’

(Small Steps, 2004)

The social benefits for children were similarly highlighted by parents, and particularly the way in which the younger children (say 18 months) could be drawn productively into the collective life and energy of a workshop.

Secondly, there were benefits for parents themselves in terms of adult learning. For many, Small Steps was a new and unfamiliar gallery experience even if they had already been to Tate on a family visit. The expectation that parents would work closely with their children seemed particularly effective. In a sense, they were asked to be ‘intermediaries’ between artist educators and children, helping their children to participate in the workshop and also supporting the leadership of the artist educators.

Many parents reported that this insider role enabled them to enjoy and learn from activities primarily designed for young children, gain new knowledge of their children’s skills and abilities, and also to learn about the selected artists and art works.

Thirdly, some parents reported spin-offs from the workshops with regard to what children wanted to do at home and how they might support this. Children, for instance, might ask if they could repeat a song or a game, or request to do a similar art making activity. For those parents who, following a workshop, visited Tate independently with their children, some reported that this could trigger children’s memories in terms of gallery objects and spaces – the escalators, the lifts, toilets, a walkway, an entrance to a gallery room. Some children also remembered specific art works that had been the focus for a group experience and wanted to see them again. A mother who had attended a 2004 workshop commented:

‘When I’d taken Emily back again after the programme, she actually was pointing lots of things out to me … she even did some of the actions that we’d been doing, so I was really surprised because I didn’t realise that she’d taken all that in.’

(Small Steps, 2004)
Conclusion

‘It’s difficult to measure the benefits. My intuitions tell me that he takes it all in and it’s kind of stored inside him somehow. Whether he really understands exactly what spirals are or not is not so important as the experience of being in an art gallery and looking at art and being surrounded by art.’

(Small Steps parent, 2004)

This comment from a parent of a 2 year old child captures well the potential personal benefits for very young children when they spend enjoyable and meaningful time with adults in a public gallery.

Hooper-Greenhill et al (2004) have highlighted that, ‘visitors and users remain unaware of the great changes that have taken place in museums in recent years’ (p. 541). Small Steps seeks to address this need for updating and to increase local community access to the rich resources on offer in an internationally renowned gallery. Families with children under three, who may not normally visit Tate Modern, are encouraged to participate in workshops designed to give them an enjoyable way of being in the gallery and relating in personal ways to the art works. The belief is that these families will be stimulated to return independently so that Tate becomes a natural place for them to visit. In the period that the Small Steps workshops have been running there is evidence that a very significant number of families have been helped to feel they can do this.

In many ways, Small Steps is an ambitious programme for a gallery to take on. It not only aims to reach out to local families who may not see Tate as being for them, but also to include children under three, a category of visitor still very unrepresented in gallery surveys. Accommodating to the ever-shifting physical, social, and psychological needs of such young children as well as their learning in a dynamic public space is difficult, but it seems that, in many very significant ways, Small Steps is achieving this.

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