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Visualizing the Invisible: Empowering students through hidden narratives in the museum

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Abstract:

“Visualizing the Invisible” is an educational tool designed to bridge the gap between ideal and reality. While it can take years or even decades to transform our collections, this program uses our imperfect collections to teach students to recognize and stand up to discriminatory power. This booklet includes a step by step curriculum guide to help educators develop critical consciousness in their students. The program centers the material object and museum display as a source of authority in the lesson, shifting power from the instructor to the object.

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Visualizing the Invisible

Empowering students through hidden narratives in the museum

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(TO BE FORMATED FOR PRINTING FOR PRESENTATIONS)

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Introduction:

Giving Agency to Art & Students

Students face discrimination in and out of the classroom on a regular basis. Few are immune from negative treatment on grounds of race, gender, sexuality, religion, or ability. As young people, students rarely have the confidence or ability to recognize the source of their mistreatment and become self-advocates. It is intimidating to confront teachers and other adults, or even other students. Over time this regular, if at times subtle, mistreatment chips away at a student's self-esteem and potential for success.

The art museum is not immune from such subtle abuses. The treatment of objects representing minorities and women, the contextualization of foreign and religious objects, and a lack of representation can compound already pervasive feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement. As a community we, as museum curators and educators, are collectively working to better our institutions to lessen and ultimately eradicate these subtle forms of discrimination, but doing so is a slow process and takes a great amount of time and resources.

Visualizing the Invisible is an educational tool designed to bridge the gap between ideal and reality. While it can take years or even decades to transform our collections, this program uses our imperfect collections to teach students to recognize and stand up to discriminatory power. This booklet includes a step by step curriculum guide to help educators develop critical consciousness in their students. The program centers the material object and museum display as a source of authority in the lesson, shifting power from the instructor to the object. The museum is the ideal space to develop critical consciousness in students. Students can observe and reveal the structures of inequality evident in our institutions and then learn how to struggle with, confront, and transform those systems in a safe and controlled space. There is no fear that an art object will retaliate when a student confronts it or reveals its questionable history. While each of these lessons addresses a specific axis of identity, it is important to bear in mind that many of these identities exist within a single person simultaneously. Though this intersectionality is not explicitly addressed in these lesson plans, the facilitator should work to incorporate multiple facets of identity into any given lesson. Ultimately, students will be able to take the skills they develop in the gallery through this program into their own lives, having been prepared to take on the risk of self-advocacy.

Guiding Principles: Tools for Curating Critical Consciousness

In order to facilitate a pedagogically grounded program, each lesson was developed with the following five principles in mind:

1. **Student Generated Content** The exercise of revealing subliminal structures of power is most useful when the students unveil that power themselves. The goal of the program is to train students to recognize discrimination and power imbalances in their own lives. Crucial to that mission is the opportunity for students to deface power in the museum space.
2. **The Object as Authority** In these lessons the object is the lone source of authority and power. All student comments must be rooted in evidence provided by the object or other primary sources. The aim is not to make categorical generalizations about an object, but rather to recognize specific aspects of an object that impact its authority.
3. **Minimized Authority of the Instructor** The teacher is not the bearer of truth and knowledge, that is the domain of the object. In these lessons the teacher serves as a facilitator mediating the conversation and providing context and information when necessary. To insure the integrity of the pedagogical program, all new information should be introduced through primary sources, not declarative statements from the teacher. When such sources are unavailable the teacher should minimize his or her interjections to what is absolutely necessary.
4. **Organic Unveiling of Power** There is no predetermined axis of power students are expected or required to recognize. Through their questions and observations they are free to organically reveal truths embedded within the object. The instructor should not guide them towards any particular conclusion.
5. **Confrontation without Repercussion** The stated goal of this program is confrontation. Students are encouraged to engage critically and honestly with the objects and each other. So long as observations and comments are rooted in the object and primary sources all arguments can be expressed. Students should feel no obligation to defend the object or institution.

How to Use this Guide

This booklet provides five lesson templates that can be adopted to fit a variety of different educational needs. Each lesson offers general instructions for the teacher. The activities and discussions are designed to be scaled to the level of the audience. The instructor should choose the questions and activities that are appropriate for the students' age and experience level. Not every question in a lesson needs to or should be asked. They are there for the instructor to have options for class discussion.

The lessons are all designed to take 20-40 minutes, but can be lengthened or shortened to fit scheduling constraints. To lengthen simply solicit more student responses. To shorten ask fewer questions.

The introduction to each lesson first gives a brief explanation of the use of the lesson and then breaks down the reasoning behind each question. Each lesson begins by asking the students to make observations about the topic of discussion (the work of art or the general exhibition). This is to allow students to take ownership over the space and object and discover the details of the subject on their own. This active observation fosters a stronger investment throughout the entire session.

Following each lesson is a section entitled "A Step Further." These questions are designed for groups that are comfortable with one another and are engaging with the material on a personal level. These questions are not suitable for all students, and the teacher should carefully decide which questions to use. Many of these questions can elicit difficult personal responses so the teacher must be prepared and equipped to engage.

At the end of the book is a section of readings that were used to inform the writing of these lessons. These selections also serve as a useful reference for further reading.

Reframing History:

Teaching alternative narratives with history painting

Introduction

Throughout much of Western Civilization, history painting has been considered the paradigmatic art form, superior to all others. Napoleon Bonaparte, Catharine the Great, and George Washington all sought to immortalize themselves in the grandeur of elaborate history paintings. This lesson will teach students to problematize traditional narratives of history.

Objectives

1. Identify the distinction between history and mythologized narrative
2. Build confidence in student's knowledge of history by challenging the narrative of the painting
3. Consider historical sources and motivations

Lesson Outline

1. Ask the students to describe the painting using open ended questions such as, "what do you see here" or "what is going on in this picture." The students generate answers rooted in the evidence of the image. The instructor's responsibility at this point is to insure that student comments are grounded in the image.
2. After the painting has been sufficiently described ask the students what the narrative of the image is (if it has not already been brought up). The students then describe the history presented in the image. If students are unfamiliar with the historical event the image depict the instructor should provide background.
3. Once the students have articulated the painting's depiction of the event provide evidence that conflicts with the image's narrative. This evidence can be another picture or a historical document, but should ideally be a primary source. Ask students to explain the new evidence.
4. Once it is clear that the students understand the new information, ask them how it compares with the original artwork the group was discussing. After a difference is pointed out ask students why they think the discrepancy might exist, adding information when deemed necessary.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by discussing historical authority with the students.

How does history get written?

Who gets to tell the stories of history?"

Whose stories do we believe and why?"

What history is being told in this museum?

How does it differ from your conception of history?

Why might that discrepancy exist?"

A Step Further

Encourage students to relate the lesson back to their own lives:

How do other people think of you?

What assumptions do they make about your background and history?

What would a history portrait of you look like?

How would it change depending on who made it?

How would you talk to someone who represented you in a way you do not see yourself?

(INSERT)



In a lesson on John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence* the instructor can bring an image of Independence Hall to show students that Trumbull's rendition of the room does not match the actual architecture. The Instructor could also highlight that the men in the painting were never all in the same room at the same time. Why might Trumbull have depicted it this way?

Building Narratives:

Teaching from incomplete collections of non-western art

Introduction

Many museums are working diligently to widen the scope of works displayed in their halls. This process can take decades and is incredibly expensive, leaving institutions with incomplete collections for long stretches of time. This lesson will teach students how to recognize the historical narrative being portrayed in an exhibition and empower them to think critically about what a representative collection could look like.

Objectives

1. Identify the overarching narrative of an installation
2. Identify holes in the historical narrative presented in an exhibition
3. Consider what a more complete collection would look like

Lesson Outline

1. Bring a group of students into a gallery of works that attempts to build a comprehensive picture of a culture, or an aspect thereof. The instructor begins by introducing the students to the space, giving a general overview of the region represented. After students have been oriented to the space, ask them to construct the story of an aspect of life being told in the space through 5 object (Fewer or more objects can be chosen to accommodate time restraints). Make sure that each student is covering a different part of the gallery, ideally the entire space in question will be covered.
2. Once the students have written their histories using the evidence in the gallery have them organize all of their narratives into one overarching history, telling the story as it is presented in the space. Throughout the entire presentation and organization process it is the instructor's main responsibility to insure that the presentations are rooted in the objects under consideration. Identify when students make claims that are not supported by the artworks.
3. After all of the students have presented and arranged their narratives pose the following questions, use your best judgement to determine what will be most effective for your class and the space you are in:
What areas of life does this exhibit teach us about?
What does it not?
Where are each of these objects from? Are these places close to each other? (it will be helpful to have a map of the region)
When was each of these objects made? Were they used at the same time?

Why do you think we are only shown about certain aspects of life in this region?

Who is telling the story in this space?

What survives to become part of the archive?

Conclusion

End the lesson by explaining to the class the reasons why the collection is incomplete. Reaffirm their observations of gaps in the gallery's representation and how that impacts the way certain groups are viewed.

A Step Further

Encourage students to relate the lesson back to their own lives:

What aspects of your life are others most interested in?

Are those the things you think are most important to your identity?

How do you talk to people who insist on focusing on select aspects of your identity?

Much of the collection of Asian Art at the Yale University Art Gallery was donated and collected by members of the Luce family. How do the tastes and interests of collectors influence what is seen in museums?

Racial Self-Representation: Portrayals of the “other” in the museum

Introduction

Artists of color are widely underrepresented in encyclopedic museum collections. Often times when they are included their works are conceptualized exclusively in terms of the artist’s racial subjectivity and not as independent works of art. This lesson will teach students how to recognize when works of art are used in an exhibition as representations of diversity and how they are often curated differently than works by white artists. This lesson is specifically designed for use in exhibition spaces that display works by artists of color with minimal connective narrative arc.

Objectives

1. Identify the artistic merit in works that are contextualized exclusively in terms of racial representation
2. Recognize the use of diversity as a way of subjugating artists of color

Lesson Outline

1. Introduce the students to the exhibition. Have them read the introductory wall text (if there is any) and have them describe the goals of the exhibit and what they expect to see.
2. Take the students to a pre-selected work. Ask the students to describe the work using open ended questions such as, “what do you see here” or “what is going on in this picture.” The students generate answers rooted in the evidence of the image. The instructor’s responsibility at this point is to insure that student comments are grounded in the image.
3. Once the work has been sufficiently described, ask the students to generate a list of major themes evident in the work. Ask students how these theme’s relate back to the aforementioned exhibition goals.
Is the work successful in the exhibition context?
Are certain components of the work highlighted or surprised by the curatorial thesis?
4. Repeat the process with a second object and ask students to connect the two objects using the themes identified in the introduction to the exhibit. After, have them connect the objects in other ways they see fit.
5. Give the students time to explore all or a portion of the exhibit. Have them each select a third object and have them explain how that object relates back to the stated themes of the exhibit and the student generated themes.

Conclusion

End the lesson with a discussion about how the objects relate to the themes of the exhibit.

What are the main themes evident in the objects that you think the artist wants to communicate?

Does the theme of the exhibit limit what you are able to learn from the objects?

Is there another theme that better unifies these objects?

What other objects could be included in this exhibit?

Why are these works put together?

Should they be together?

A Step Further

Encourage students to relate the lesson back to their own lives:

How do others contextualize you?

Who do they expect your friends to be?

What groups do others put you in and why?

What groups do you put yourself in?

(INSERT)

The exhibit *She Who Tells a Story* (organized by Museum of Fine Arts in Boston) displayed a selection of photographs taken by women artists from the Arab world and Iran. How does this influence the identities of each individual artist?

Gender Self-Representation: Portrayals of women in the museum

Introduction

Generally there are many more male artists than female artists represented in large museum collections. Usually images of women in the museum were produced by men for male consumption. This lesson will teach students to recognize the ways in which women are represented in the gallery space and the ways in which female bodies are produced in art for male consumption. This lesson is geared towards older students and makes reference to sexual themes and ideas.

Objectives

1. Identify the ways women are represented in museum collections
2. Discuss the intended audience of paintings of the female body
3. Recognize artistic production of female bodies as a manifestation of male artists' control over female subjects

Lesson Outline

1. Take the students to a pre-selected work. (This exercise is designed for use with artistic representations of the female nude). Ask the students to describe the work using open ended questions such as, "what do you see here" or "what is going on in this picture." The students generate answers rooted in the evidence of the image. The instructor's responsibility at this point is to insure that student comments are grounded in the image.
2. Once the work has been sufficiently described, ask the students to spend time describing the female subject
 - What is she feeling?
 - Does she want to be in the picture?
 - Why is she in this space?
 - Is she choosing to be there?
 - Could she cover herself if she wanted to?
3. End this portion of the exercise by asking students to speculate about the relationship between the subject and artist (Using your best judgment, decide if you would like to introduce the concept of the *male gaze*)
 - What is the relationship between them?
 - Is she making eye-contact with him?
 - Why would he pose her in this way?
 - Would she be posed differently if the artist was a woman?
 - Would we think about the prior questions differently if the artist was a woman?

How is the artist thinking about sexuality?

Who is allowed to demonstrate sexuality publically?

[If there is information available about the female subject, tell it to the students now. How does this information change the way we think about her (if at all)?]

Conclusion

End the lesson with a discussion about the role women play in the gallery.

How are women generally represented in museums?

How are female artists represented in museums?

Who selects work for inclusion in museums?

A Step Further

Encourage students to relate the lesson back to their own lives:

Do people think of you in a certain way because of your gender?

Do people think of you differently because of your sexuality?

In groups with people of the other gender do you find yourself playing a specific role?

How do you respond to people who view you exclusively as an object of Desire?

(INSERT)

Pablo Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* is considered one of the most important works of modern art. How are women portrayed in the image? How do they interact with the viewer?

Rewriting Ritual:

Display of religious objects in the museum

Introduction

Museums historically grew out of collections of art amassed by churches, often for devotional purposes. Many museums still include ritual objects as works of art. Often these objects are disaffiliated from their original religious context and secularized for placement in the museum. This lesson will teach students to recognize the ways in which the museum space alienates objects from their intended uses.

Objectives

1. Identify the ways in which museums decontextualize objects
2. Identify the difference between how an object is displayed in a museum and in a religious setting

Lesson Outline

1. Take students to a preselected work of art that was originally intended as a religious object. Ask the students to describe the work using open ended questions such as, “what do you see here” or “what is going on in this picture.” The students generate answers rooted in the evidence of the image or object. The instructor’s responsibility at this point is to insure that student comments are grounded in the image.
2. Once the object has been sufficiently described begin discussing it as a ritual object by posing the following questions:
 - Was this object made to be put in a museum?
 - Why is this object here?
 - How would you imagine using this object?
3. If available, show the students a primary source with the object in use. Some examples would include a photograph or video of a service or a selection of writing that references the object or its religious significance.
 - What would happen if someone who practices this religion came and saw this object on display here?
 - Would he or she recognize it in this context?
 - Would they be able to use it as a ritual object?

Conclusion

End the lesson by discussing with the students the ways in which objects are contextualized in the gallery space.

- How does the museum change the object?
- How does it relate to the other objects in the museum?
- (If you had seen multiple objects from different religions) How is this object shown differently than the one we previously studied?

A Step Further

Encourage students to relate the lesson back to their own lives:

Is religion important to your life?

Is your religion something you are proud of?

How do other people contextualize your religious identities?

Do those judgements feel fair?

(INSERT)

The Temple of Dendur is an Egyptian temple that was reconstructed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. How does the temple's place in the museum change how people interact with it?

Further Reading on Education Pedagogy and Social Justice

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