

# Touch the Art: Accessible Learning Opportunities for the Blind and Visually Impaired

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## **Abstract**

**Putting it simply, the arts should be available to all individuals regardless of their ability. However, art educators, perhaps due to limited experience or knowledge are often unsure how to make the arts accessible for the blind and visually impaired. This paper discusses how the author solicited the involvement of multiple community partners to support an opportunity to challenge the notion that people who are blind cannot make art. The author describes the intentionality with which experiences were planned that eliminated barriers for the promotion of a more inclusive and accessible learning environment that encouraged innovative instruction and learning. The workshops explored concepts including perspective and drawing using foreground, middle ground and background, weaving, clay and using lines to express emotions. The workshops and the accompanying exhibition were titled, “Sensory: Please Touch the Art” and encouraged participants and viewers to interact with art in multi-sensory ways. One participant stated, “I may not have sight, but I**

**have vision. It was about time that we were given a chance to demonstrate to the sighted world what we can do.”**

## **Keywords**

**Social Justice, Visually Impaired, Accessibility, Universal Design for Learning, Inclusion.**

Visual arts enrich both human experience and society by inviting individuals to engage in creative expression. To that avail, art exploration should be available to all individuals, regardless of ability. Yet, for individuals with visual impairments, participation in the arts have historically presented challenges. Art educators are not always confident in their knowledge of how to adapt their courses to accommodate individuals with limited vision. Similarly, museum exhibitions are often designed to be experienced visually. The desire to create accessible spaces and experiences for diverse populations exists; the challenge lies therein, how to make it happen.

The art community tends to uphold the “norms of the able bodied majority” including in the confines of the art museum (Candlin 2003, Poria, Y., Reichel A., & Brandt, Y. 2009; Samuels, J. 2006) where patrons are discouraged from handling the art because it is ingrained that we are to look, but not touch. According to Dewey (1938), “experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication” (p. 22). While it is understandable that museums work with the intent of preserving the quality of the art, this simultaneously creates limitations for the visually impaired. Howes and Classen (2014) wrote, “as soon as something is classified as art, its non-visual qualities are suppressed, and, as trained spectators, we know that the right thing to do is to stand back and look at it” (p. 17). How can it

be expected, then, for audiences in galleries or museums to enjoy a full experience with the art if there is not a complete interaction “carried to full,” as Dewey suggested, if audiences are only able to rely upon the sense of sight? In recent years curators such as Amanda Cachia (2017) and artist Carmen Papalia (2015) have made significant efforts to increase accessibility of art exhibitions in gallery and museum settings through socially engaged practice and the drawing of attention to ideologies and methodologies for curators as they plan exhibitions. In spite of these positive efforts there are still concerns with aesthetics, sociability, and comfort for the non-disabled (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). Guided tours or special exhibits require prearranged appointments (moma.org), and in museums where training is limited, docents are unsure how to provide assistance. Society often positions the disabled individual as the source of the problem. However, it is our society that disables individuals (Siebers, 2008). The absence of visually impaired students in our classrooms and in our museums demands change to our social and built environment to promote their inclusion. Additionally, while current programs do exist to assist individuals with disabilities in achieving employment or education and training as it relates to an employment goal, recreation and activities for pleasure are not seen as an entitlement (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). For this reason, it is vital that we provide opportunities for the individuals with a disability to develop positive identities and achieve a deeper understanding of self (Charlton, 2000). One way this can be accomplished is by providing opportunities for individuals to develop their interests and talents, in our case, to create art and share it with the public.

The desire to expand accessible art opportunities for individuals with visual impairments became a passion of the author’s several years ago as he observed firsthand the frustration expressed by his wife, blind since birth, in her attempts to become an art connoisseur. She, and many individuals with limited vision, have been counseled out of taking art classes because of the perception that people who can’t see can’t make art. When they visited gallery exhibitions,

touching the pieces is almost always prohibited, yet she relies heavily on her sense of touch to explore her environment. As art educators, we are called to promote excellence and equity for all students through differentiated educational opportunities, resources and systems of support that respects a range of diversity in the uniquenesses of all students (NAEA, 2012). Her struggles, and the professional commitment the author has to making art classrooms accessible for all students became the motivation behind a community-based art experience designed to empower individuals with visual impairments to create and exhibit their art through a project entitled, *Sensory: Please Touch the Art*.

This multi-faceted grant funded effort required a comprehensive approach in planning to ensure that participants would truly enjoy an accessible experience. Many parties in the Omaha area saw value in our vision of offering four day-long workshops in which participants would first receive instruction on a particular art medium and then open studio time to create pieces that would then be featured in a six-week long public art exhibition. As such, the author and his wife sought financial support from the Nebraska Arts Council, a state organization funded by the State of Nebraska, National Endowment for the Arts and Nebraska Cultural Endowment, WhyArts?, an organization providing underserved populations with access to inclusive arts programming, and the Omaha Association of the Blind, which promotes the social, intellectual and economic welfare of the legally blind. The author also received additional in-kind support in marketing, web development, and space from the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) and Outlook Nebraska, Inc., an organization that offers training, employment and enrichment experiences for the visually impaired. Participants were invited to pay a nominal fee when registering for the workshop to secure their place in the course. Recognizing that individuals with disabilities may not have the financial resources to support recreational experiences, the registration fee was voluntary as cost should not be a prohibitive factor for participation by any individual.

## **The Workshops**

Each of the four Saturday workshops were held in late summer, 2016 and served between 12-18 participants ranging in age from 14-78. During the registration process, individuals were asked to share any relevant past art experiences; some individuals had never been allowed to enroll in an art class while one woman had studied art in college before losing her vision. Cognizant of the students' diverse backgrounds, the workshops were scaffolded so that students with some art instruction were encouraged to engage in more complex creations or to use more advanced techniques and materials while those new to art received instruction that matched their needs. During the mornings, all participants received general instruction on a particular art medium, practiced techniques, and explored new concepts. During the afternoon, participants were able to work on projects of their choosing. The instructor was available to answer questions, provide one-on-one instruction, engage in conversations with individuals and challenge those participants who had more refined skills.

During the first workshop, "Expressing Emotion in Art," instruction centered on the use of lines and shapes to convey emotions. Jagged sharp edges are often associated with anger or anxiety whereas flowing forms and soft edges elicit thoughts of calm and peacefulness. Students had the opportunity to explore several two and three-dimensional shapes and articulate what various lines and points conveyed to them on an emotional level. Students then had the opportunity to use a Sensational Blackboard to draw lines and shapes of their own to communicate an emotion of their choice. Sensational Blackboards, developed by Ann Cunningham, artist and educator of the visually impaired, uses a healable surface, printer paper, and ballpoint pens to enable artists to create tactile drawings. Students then moved to creating three-dimensional forms using floral foam to carve a sculpture that represented an emotion. Finally, artists transitioned to clay and wire to create tactile pieces.

In the second workshop, facilitated by textile artist, Mary Zicafoose, students received a brief history of weaving and textiles from around the world. Next, students received instruction on how to create their own simple cardboard looms after which participants were charged with selecting and creating their own complex weavings. The instructor revisited a discussion from workshop one with regard to emotion and expanded the discussion into how the textures of fabrics elicit different emotions. Soft fleece could be associated with thoughts of comfort whereas burlap or canvas offer a much different experience. Once students determined an objective for their weaving, they selected fabrics and worked independently to warp their looms and proceed to create their pieces. Students also were introduced to a large floor loom and worked collaboratively to create a large weaving.

The third workshop tackled difficult concepts associated with drawing through an exploration of approximate perspective, using activities developed by artist and educator, Ann Cunningham from the Colorado Center for the Blind. Approximate perspective focused on developing participants' understanding of foreground, middle ground, and background, convergence and diminution of size using a variety of instructional strategies that use descriptive vocabulary and sensory experiences. For example, the instructor asked volunteers to pound on the ground with yardsticks, and as the source of that sound changed, individuals pointed to the sound, and as it moved further into the distance, participants were able to demonstrate, with their extended arms, how sound converged in the distance to a point. To demonstrate foreground, middle ground and background, frames were created out of cardboard that students could reach through, and using ribbons, were able to trace their fingers over the ribbons that extended through the frame and were attached to the ground at different intervals. The ribbon that had the steepest decline would be closest to the frame (foreground), the ribbon that had a slight decline would be the middle ground and the ribbon that went almost parallel to the ground where the participants had to reach far into the frame would indicate the background.

Individuals practiced concepts by creating their own drawings by again using the self-healing mats called Sensational Blackboards. To illustrate this point, there was one participant in this workshop who after experiencing the activity asked the question, “So a car that is farther away from me appears smaller?” The author responded in the affirmative. The participant continued, “That is pretty amazing. I thought that a car appeared the same size no matter how far away it was” (Personal Communication, 2016). Traditionally, in Western art education practice, the instructor will show a visual reproduction and discuss with students the concepts of foreground, middle ground and background. Other times, the instructor may use a dry erase marker to demonstrate these concepts on the reproduction or they might invite a student to point out the foreground, middle ground and background. All of these strategies rely heavily on the visual. However, this method of instruction is not conducive to teaching the visually impaired. Misconceptions about diminishing size can be pervasive and students in this workshop experienced some cognitive dissonance when their misconceptions were troubled until students were able to physically experience moments that allowed them to understand in new ways. Using the touch method to discuss foreground, middle ground, and background as described by the above activity required a lot of planning to make sure the vocabulary was clear, there was plenty of space for the ribbons to extend through the frame, and space for the participants to maneuver. Even though artist and educator Ann Cunningham designed this activity for the visually impaired, this would be a beneficial differentiated activity to add into any teaching environment to convey this abstract concept.

The final workshop focused on the use of clay to create coil and slab vessels. Students also had the opportunity to throw a pot on a potter’s wheel. Clay lent itself well to hands-on art instruction and many of the participants particularly enjoyed creating pieces during this workshop. The vast majority of the participants had never thrown, let alone centered clay before. What came as a surprise was the natural ability to center the clay among the participants.

Discussion that followed revealed that success was attributed to the tactile nature of clay and relying on touch rather than sight to know whether the clay was centered on the wheel. Raising the clay into a functional vessel took more practice. The participants placed both elbows against their hipbones and cupped their hands around the now centered clay. The walls of the vessel were pulled out by gently resting the index finger and middle finger of the left and against the interior wall. The index finger and middle finger of the right hand rested against the exterior wall opposite of the left hand. In a synchronous motion the left and the right hands pulled out and up. This process was slowly repeated until the desired height or vessel shape was achieved.

During this inaugural year, the instructor realized that a fifth “workshop” was needed. Because students worked at different paces, and some attempted more complex projects, at the close of workshop four several pieces were unfinished, and individuals expressed an interest in glazing their clay pieces. The fifth workshop took the form of an open studio during which participants not only finished pieces but were also invited to select pieces they wished to be considered for a juried public gallery exhibition. The University of Nebraska’s gallery director guided individuals through the process of crafting an artist statement, determining insurance value, and deciding whether pieces would be available for sale.

## **Accessibility for All**

Accessibility is complex and, as such, the instructor emphasized the principle of Universal Design for Learning when making decisions about the main project components: transportation, environment, materials and instruction. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is defined as a set of principles that: 1. Provide multiple means of representation, 2. Provide multiple means of action and expression, 3. Provide multiple means of engagement for curriculum development that gives all individuals equal opportunities to learn. Additionally, UDL emphasizes the need for curriculum to adapt to an individual’s needs rather than require adaptation from the learner



(Rose & Meyer, 2006; [www.udlcenter.org](http://www.udlcenter.org), 2014). In every decision made, the driving questions were, are barriers for the individual participation being eliminated? Is universal access being provided?

From the start, eliminating transportation barriers was a must. The visually impaired often face an increase in travel costs and investment of time in making travel arrangements because of their reliance on public transportation (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). Lack of access to transportation often prevents individuals from engaging in recreational activities because of the additional financial burden it imposes. To respond to this need, participants were asked to register for workshops at least one week in advance to give the instructor time to arrange transportation via taxi, Uber or a local paratransit company, at no cost to the participant. Individuals were picked up at their front doors, dropped off at the workshop location, and at the end of the day, were transported back home. The instructor and his wife worked with trusted taxi drivers who were familiar with the blind community of Omaha to ensure that participants were treated with respect. Program participants indicated that had it not been for transportation being provided, nearly three-fourths would not have been able to participate.

A second component that required particular attention was securing the ideal environment. The intent was to allow participants to have access to a full art studio with easy access to an extensive selection of art materials with a large, accessible workspace. One goal was to create a space in which it was easy to move around. This included removing unnecessary clutter from around the room, moving tables and chairs to create wide walkways to make it easier for individuals using mobility aids like walkers, canes and wheelchairs to navigate. For the sake of consistency, we maintained the same classroom configuration for all workshops. When participants arrived to the classroom, particularly for the first two workshops, the instructor offered a verbal description of the classroom environment using phrases like, “There are four tables with five chairs at each,” as well as a physical tour highlighting the location of important

items like the sink, supply table, garbage bins, and workspaces. Using the clock face as a reference can be helpful, as in “At twelve o’clock you will find an empty seat.” Students with some vision had the option to choose seats nearer to a natural light source. The instructor also let participants know who was in the room and where they were located. This allowed students to select seats next to people with whom they wanted to sit. By the third and fourth workshops, participants were so comfortable with the classroom that they needed very little verbal description beyond locating their friends. Simultaneously, participants appreciated the space because it was a “real” artist studio in the center of a bustling college campus. The participants were visible to students, faculty and visitors as they worked.

The principles of Universal Design also guided my selection of materials and instructional strategies. It cannot be emphasized enough the importance of using rich verbal description during demonstrations and instructional sessions. The instructor would often catch himself using phrases like, “look at this,” “I am going to put that on top.” With limited or no vision, individuals would not know what “this” or “that” was unless verbal context was provided. Over time the instructions became more detailed and, when participants still had questions, the instructor found new ways of describing visual concepts using some non-traditional objects. For example, approximate perspective, or tactile perspective drawing, is difficult to conceptualize if an individual has never had sight.

## **Disability Studies or Not?**

Periodically, when *Sensory: Please Touch the Art* has been introduced within academic settings the question inevitably comes up, how are these workshops and the accompanying exhibition considered appropriate for disability studies? According to The Society for Disability Studies, a corner stone of Disability Studies is “explor[ing] models and theories that examine social, political, cultural, and economic factors that define disability and help determine personal and

collective responses to difference. The definition goes on to define the value of “encouraging participation by disabled students and faculty, and ensuring physical and intellectual access.

The workshops and exhibition arose to trouble the pervasive thinking within our community that art does not belong to the disabled community. Throughout the planning, individuals with visual impairments were the leading force behind nearly all of the decisions. The organizers, both disabled themselves, were committed to creating an experience that provided a space that encouraged physical and intellectual access. Volunteers who thought they needed to control the work of workshop participants were reminded that the individuals did not need, nor want, the interventions provided by non-disabled people. These workshops challenged the traditional medical model of disability as personal deficit and troubled, in many ways, the cultural norms of traditional art education and expression.

Some would argue that our efforts could have been more innovative and pushed the boundaries of art creation further. For example, instead of participants engaging in a plain-weave weaving on a cardboard loom, participants might have been given a variety of fabrics with different textures and asked to create a work that moves. The challenge that we faced, not unlike that faced in spaces of education across the world, is in creating an accessible, empowering space that met the varied needs and abilities of all students. The cardboard looms were not selected as a means of simplifying the participants’ opportunities because the organizers didn’t believe they were capable. During the inaugural year of these workshops, the organizers tried to do what they could with the limited budget available and follow the lead of the participants, many of whom had been denied access to art experiences for the entirety of their lives. For some of our participants, these workshops were the first time that they had been offered an opportunity to learn art. As is the case with education, scaffolding of instruction and gradual release were valuable practices. Students who had prior knowledge of art techniques were encouraged to extend their skills in less directed ways. In the second iteration of Sensory in 2017,

participants were even more involved in selecting the medium and methods for instruction.

Throughout the workshops, the organizers were intentional about removing barriers that frequently are prohibitive in many societal experiences. For example, transportation is often a barrier that limits individuals' access to participate in recreational experiences. The organizers provided transportation at no cost to anyone that wished to attend. The classroom space was arranged in a way that ensured access by all individuals, and participants' feedback was constantly gathered to continually improve any challenges that arose. The organizers never viewed the individuals as "less than," but rather as "the experts" of their own experiences. The organizers never intentionally attempted to elevate their knowledge above that of the artists in attendance. While this work was not without challenges, and there remains room to enhance this work and further the representation of disability studies in action, the organizers are committed to the empowerment of participants. It is never about the organizers, it is about the artists.

## **The Exhibition**

Just as the workshops came to an end, a second phase of the project was just getting started, one intended to trouble the norm of the traditional gallery experience. The director of the University of Nebraska at Omaha's art gallery, a local artist, the instructor, and his wife began imagining a gallery exhibition that would encourage visitors, both sighted and unsighted, to engage with art in multi-sensory ways. The collaboration created a national call for artwork that sought artists willing to craft pieces that would convey meaning through multiple senses, with a particular emphasis on touch, sound, and smell. Submissions were received from around the United States. Diverse in nature they included a piece entitled *Vox Cosmos* by Troy J. Muller that emitted a continuous low-pitched hum that could be manipulated through touch as well as an artwork featuring a stationary rabbit carved from slate called *Hidden*. Cunningham's work is an example of a chammed sculpture in which a three-dimensional subject is described on a two-

sided bas-relief. In addition to the pieces from the national call, individuals from our workshops also submitted artwork. A portion of the gallery exhibition was dedicated specifically to their work.

The exhibition *Sensory: Please Touch the Art* wasn't unique only for its focus on the multi-sensory exploration of art. Every aspect of the gallery experience incorporated principles of universal design. Prior to, and during installation, individuals with visual impairments provided guidance to staff on how to maximize accessibility. Tactile maps indicating the location of pieces were available to attendees. Artist statements and wall texts were displayed using high contrast, large print fonts and were also available in Braille and audio formats. Individuals could choose to use headphones as they traveled through the gallery to hear audio description of each piece. Everything could be touched, smelled, listened to, and interacted with in multiple ways. Volunteers staffed the entrances and informed patrons of all of the accessibility features, offered guided tours, and encouraged everyone to touch everything. Every person who assisted during the gallery exhibition was trained in how to respectfully offer assistance to visually impaired patrons, the appropriate use of sighted guide and how to use verbally rich description.

The evening the gallery was unveiled was one of energy and learning. Never before had so many individuals attended an opening reception in the history of the gallery. University staff commented that they had never observed so much activity and excitement during a gallery exhibition, ever. Denise Brady, UNO Gallery Director, stated:

The exhibition brought a whole new concept of what art can be. I think to anyone who came through here, it put the art gallery in touch with a whole community of people that we had never been in touch with before. (D. Brady, personal communication, January, 18, 2017)

The gallery was equally as exciting for the workshop participants. One elated participant

said:

I felt so proud to have something on display in a real gallery. It was exciting to bring my family and friends to the gallery to see something that I created. I will never forget this feeling. I feel like I can call myself an artist. (KL, personal communication, October 6, 2016)

The instructor may have provided a safe space, materials and content knowledge for this project but everything was merely a labor of social justice. This story of transformation and success really belongs to the participants. During the opening reception of the gallery one of our participants stated:

I may not have sight, but I have vision. It was about time that we were given a chance to demonstrate to the sighted world what we can do. (KK, personal communication, October 6, 2016)

Another of our participants who only recently lost her sight shared:

This experience reminded me that I do have so much to offer. I was in a dark place when this opportunity came along. I was doubting myself and I was starting to believe what others said, that blind people weren't capable of certain things. And even though I don't necessarily love what I created during these workshops, I have rediscovered possibility. I've never felt more proud than I do right now. (L. Johnson, personal communication, September 24, 2016)

In total, more than 1,000 individuals visited the gallery during the six-week show, and the exhibition was named the "third best group exhibition of 2016" for the Omaha Metro region (Krainak, 2016). No one could have anticipated the growth and transformation that occurred

during this project, all because a group of talented, intelligent individuals who are blind or visually impaired were given a creative, supportive space in which to work. As one participant so beautifully put it:

On the first day of this workshop, I was just a blind person going to an art class. But now, now I am an artist who just happens to be blind. (KS, personal communication, September 24, 2016)

It is impossible to call the workshops and gallery a success when there is still so much work to be done to improve the experiences of individuals with visual impairments and the arts. These efforts were an important step in creating a space for individuals with visual impairments, who have often been absent from both art making and exhibitions, to challenge the deficit views of society that decides who can make art and how it can be experienced. Freire (2007) writes “But one does not liberate people by alienating them. Authentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). We must continually practice what we have learned to improve how we both teach the arts and share the arts with both those with and without vision. The work of equality will not happen without action. In the case of this work, the visually impaired individuals led the charge. Their voices, their experiences and their knowledge made this experience one of power and, for some, even emancipation. The success belongs to the participants.

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