



Seeing THROUGH the LINES at SFMOMA Project Report

Fellows Team:

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Project Abstract

Seeing THROUGH the LINES at SFMOMA is a collaborative project of the Education Department at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). The project is an effort to use Teaching for Understanding (TfU) principles for “teaching” concepts of modern and contemporary art to audiences of various ages and backgrounds in an informal learning environment. In the fall of 2002, the Education Department unveiled a brand-new education space, just steps away from the Museum’s permanent collection galleries. The Koret Visitor Education Center (KVEC) is a state-of-the-art space, that features a drop-in center—the Learning Lounge—where the public can sit down, read a catalogue, or browse the Museum’s award-winning multimedia programs; a lecture room for public lectures, teacher institutes, docent training classes, and video screenings; and studios where docent tours for school groups begin/end and hands-on teen and family workshops are held. *Seeing THROUGH the LINES at SFMOMA* employed the Koret Center as a “test” space for TfU ideas, particularly the use of throughlines (TLs) to unify some of the Museum’s essential educational audiences: families, teens, school children, adult visitors, and the Museum’s docents.

Project Goals

- to grow professionally as educators by studying with classroom teachers using the Teaching for Understanding framework
- to work collaboratively with one another in order to connect individual areas of programming (schools, teens, families, and adult visitors) more closely
- to create a consistent thread/voice that will enable museum visitors to build skills for exploring modern and contemporary art on their own
- to give the different audiences intriguing and inquisitive inroads into the concepts, practices, and forms of modern and contemporary art, thereby deepening their personal connection to and understanding of art and creative expression
- to test whether Teaching for Understanding is flexible enough to work in a Museum setting with audiences of different ages and cultural backgrounds





Project Process

Initial Steps:

Early in the process, the SFMOMA fellows team decided to pass on what we learned at the summer PZ workshop to the entire Education Department. Our initial objective was to create “buy-in” for our fellows project, but we also wanted to cultivate a collaborative environment in which we felt supported and encouraged by our colleagues. To this end, we distributed a chapter on throughlines to each education staff member and held a two-hour brainstorming session where we discussed what we thought our visitors needed to maximize their experience with modern/contemporary art. We decided upon three throughlines to “test” during the year:

- *Where do ideas for making art come from?*
- *How does art connect us to the artist? ourselves? each other? the world?*
- *How can we find meaning in a work of art?*

In addition to working with the Education Department, we also consulted Lois Hetland at Project Zero, for feedback on other possibilities for TLs and/or other ways of wording our proposed TLs. Once our TLs were finalized, we worked with the Museum’s Graphic Design Department to print them in large, bold type and then hang them in the Koret Center studio classrooms, where docent tours for school groups begin and end and all family and teen programs occur.

Individual programs:

Docent Program

How can docents help visitors connect with the art at SFMOMA by using throughlines on their tours? This has been the throughline for the docent program component of our fellowship. Much of this year has been spent educating the docents about the concept of throughlines and getting their “buy-in” for the project. This process began at the school docent team meetings in the fall, where Julie presented the three throughlines, explained the concept behind throughlines, and suggested ways that docents might use them on their tours. Similar presentations about throughlines were made to docents who tour High School groups and to the Docent Council— a group including both school docents and public tour docents. Following these fall meetings, Julie wrote an article in the Docent Report and sent out email articles reiterating the purpose of the throughlines and suggested ways of using them on tours.

Following a very successful January Fellows Meeting at SFMOMA, Julie held a Throughlines Workshop for Docents that was modeled on the experiences and feedback from other BATDC fellows who experimented with our throughlines in the Museum’s galleries. This workshop was held multiple times and offered docents the opportunity to spend time in the galleries exploring our permanent collection pieces through the lens of the throughlines. These workshops proved to be effective opportunities for docents to increase their comfort level with the throughline questions and to brainstorm with other docents about effective touring strategies that would enable them to address or incorporate the throughlines into their tours.

All of the throughlines seem to be inherently part of many docent tours at SFMOMA. Furthermore, our

commitment to interactive tours, using inquiry and discussion techniques, lends itself to incorporating the throughlines into tours in a more intentional way. Many docents have found that being aware of the throughlines has made their tours more purposeful.

About using TLs on tours, one docent said,

The throughlines make it easier to focus on a particular topic that everyone in the audience can relate to. When I tour the Andreas Gursky exhibition, I ask *Where do you think Gursky got the idea to do this?* and *How does this work connect to the world today?* Since my tour theme is ‘dealing with the here and now: the world today’, the throughline *How does art connect us to the artist? Ourselves? Each other? The World?* is a great reiteration of my theme!

Another docent said,

Throughlines seem, for me, to be a state of mind, an attitude, an approach to the works in the gallery. I use again and again the thought process and the discussion generating ideas that the questions embody. Throughlines are a broader, more inclusive container for big, wide-open thought processes that prevent us from getting “painted into a corner”—even if the topic of discussion is sculpture—or a real corner like the Matta-Clark piece!

When the school tour season ends in June, Julie will have docents complete a questionnaire about their experiences with the throughlines to determine if they used them, how they used them, which strategies seemed to be effective, and who wants to continue to work with the throughlines next year.

Teen Program

The SFMOMA Teen Visionaries is an after-school program where fifteen teens from various high schools from around San Francisco, meet twice per week under the guidance of mentor artists to do hands-on projects in visual arts: painting, print making, photography, video, and mixed media. In its third year, a docent component was added, with the goal of teaching teens touring techniques in order to provide gallery tours to families on family studios and family days. In the fall, Tana introduced the TLs to the teens. During one of the sessions with Julie’s docents, the teens discussed the throughlines as possible organizing elements for touring. Furthermore, at the end of their painting project, teens used the TLs as starting points for writing artist statements about their own work. At the end of the program, the teens will evaluate the current TLs and brainstorm possible new ones to be used in future programs.

In the winter, the youth were asked to reflect in writing on the throughlines. Here are some of their responses:

Where do ideas for making art come from?

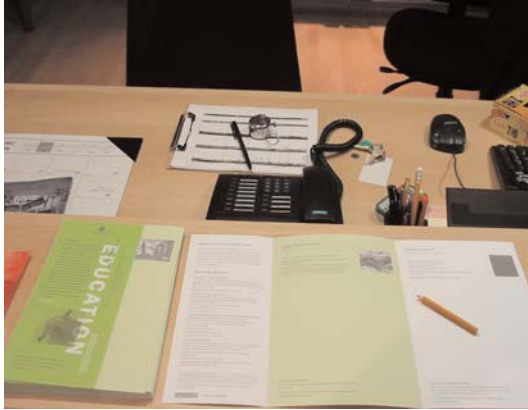
- Anywhere, the mind, the imagination, something you see when you’re walking down the street.
- Different artists find inspiration on subjects that concern them.
- I think it comes from our feelings or emotions. We also get ideas from other people.
- I think this works. You might want to specify something about where does the artist find inspiration, but I think the vaguer the better. (evaluating)

How does art connect us to the artist? ourselves? each other? the world?

- Don’t know how to answer.
- Art comes from our environment or how we perceive things in our mind.
- Art connects us by the similarities and interests we have.
- I think this is fine, you get a nice range of answers. (evaluating)

How can we find meaning in a work of art?

- Try to think of what the artist was thinking of when he made it.
- I would try to understand why exactly the artist put specific elements into the piece.
- The colors, boldness or fadedness of a paint stroke, the objects or images they use, they all tell a story together.



- I really dislike this question. Maybe it is just the wording. It might just be too connected to the question above, I think it is better to choose between the two. (evaluating)

Before the end of the school year, the youth will revisit the throughlines to reflect on them and evaluate them as a framework for this year's Teen Program.

Teacher Programs

SFMOMA also serves teachers through teacher institutes, trainings, exhibition-specific programs, and curriculum resources. Tana is employing the TfU framework to write high school curriculum for the online resource, *Making Sense of Modern Art* (MSOMA). At the third Fellows meeting, Tana and Julie began

thinking of possible ways to link theme-based lessons with docent tours. Using the Dimensions of Understanding, we broke out a language arts lesson, and linked the theme/concept directly to a docent tour. MSOMA curriculum will be tested in classrooms in fall 2003, and the curriculum website will be launched in fall 2004. We hope to implement the companion docent tour component once the curriculum has been posted online.

Family Program

The Museum's family program is a drop-in, monthly, hands-on art studio. Although there is consistent participation from Museum member families, at least 50% of participants are first-time users of the program. With the opening of the Koret Visitor Education Center, a daily component was added to the family program through a self-guided Pick-Up and Go Gallery guide. In October 2002, the TL *Where do ideas for making art come from?* was used as the design concept for this guide, which is made available to visitors when KVEC is open. Next year, the TLs will be used to provide parents with a thematic focus for the monthly, hands-on art studios. In addition, the TLs will be used to focus the hands-on activities (Box Studios), which are available in KVEC to drop-in family visitors. These Box Studios provide manipulatives for children and adults to use in KVEC and highlight an artistic concept or specific art medium.

What was useful in our process? What has propelled us forward?

Some of the most useful moments in our process have been those collaborations with other colleagues (each other, our department, other BATDC fellows and the BATDC leadership, and Lois Hetland) and the feedback and suggestions that have come out of those collaborative moments. For example, in January we had the opportunity to host part of our fellows meeting at SFMOMA. We toured the other Fellows through KVEC—showing off the TLs posted in the studio classrooms—and then toured the galleries in small groups with our TLs and some of the Quest entry-point questions as discussion guides. The feedback we received from this experience provided the structure for Julie's Throughline Workshop for the docents and resulted in the splash page of the *Treasures of Modern Art: The Legacy of Phyllis Wattis at SFMOMA* multimedia program which features our throughline questions.

Our own enthusiasm for PZ ideas and the TfU framework has been instrumental in propelling us forward in this process. The feeling that the TLs connect our various audiences and programs in a meaningful way has also been crucial to our commitment. Perhaps the most practical propeller has been the support and encouragement we have received from our department and from the BATDC Fellows meetings

What continues to challenge us? What do we hope to continue working on?

The biggest challenge we have faced is being realistic about what can be accomplished. Taking one small step at a time is crucial and we feel we have only begun to tackle what we believe is a long-term project for our individual programs, the departmental efforts in the area of Museum Education, and ultimately the way we present learning opportunities to the public we serve. Getting the “buy-in” of others has taken much of our efforts this year and will be an on-going process as we hope to make the TLs more prominent and visible throughout the Museum— incorporating them into the galleries, marketing materials, and the bigger museum experience.

After one year we believe that the TfU framework— particularly the use of throughlines as organizing principles for programming— is useful in an informal learning environment, such as SFMOMA. The enthusiastic reception from our colleagues supports our belief that TLs can be a dynamic tool for unifying various program messages and identifying shared educational goals for different audiences. Therefore, we plan to continue to our work with the throughlines in our individual areas of programming— getting more docents to use them on tours, encouraging families to use the Pick Up and Go guides, and having teens refer to the TLs in their studio practice. In addition, we will extend our BATDC Fellowship next year and some of our colleagues will attend the next summer institute. Having additional members of the Education Department understand the TfU framework, will significantly help us in future years as we further our practice of incorporating TfU ideas into the museum experience. We, in turn, hope to gain new insights into how throughlines work, how TfU functions in an informal learning environment, as well as better understand the needs of our constituents.

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