

Comment

TRAINED TO INTERACT

The “Learning in order to Teach” project and mediation in museums using Brazilian sign language (Libras)¹

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ABSTRACT: This article seeks to reflect on mediation in museums based on experiences that occurred in the “Learning in order to Teach” Project. In this case, the mediation acquires specific characteristics because it deals with young deaf people learning art-related contents in order to teach other youth in their first language. The most interesting aspect of this encounter between museum and deaf culture is a mutual, immediate and highly visible influence. While museum-goers and professionals understand that the “gestures” used by the deaf are not random (rather, on the contrary, they make up a complex language), new signs are created by the students based on the contents that are worked with and discovered in the museum. These new signs thus enrich the language itself and begin to circulate within the community.*

“Learning in order to Teach” and deaf culture

The “Learning in order to Teach” Project came about after identifying in the visitations of groups of deaf students to exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM-SP) that there was a long process of translation and interpretation in the dialog between the groups of deaf visitors and the museum’s artist-educator (AE).² The AE did not know Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) and so had his/her speech translated by the interpreter-teacher who was accompanying the group. The interpreter-teacher, on the other hand, was not familiar with the art-related content. This situation had as its counterpoint the intense communication of the deaf visitors – through gestures, glances and expressions – amongst themselves. However, none of what was said got back to the AE.

The communication difficulties between the artist-educator and the deaf visitors captured the attention of everyone more for what was being said and translated than for the exhibit itself or for the experience that could have been had through contact with the works on exhibit. The visitors’ interest in the exhibit was notable, but their doubts, questions and reflections were not sufficiently explored due to the long chain of communication established between the museum’s artist-educator and the group. The idea of this project – training deaf youth so that they could receive deaf visitors at museum exhibits – came about with the intention of the museum being able to receive the deaf in their “first language”.³

For linguist Élie Bajard,⁴ who observed the “Learning in order to Teach” Project from 2005 to 2006, it is a challenge for MAM and its artist-professors (APs) to train youth who do not share their language. As there is no linguistic intercomprehension between the APs and the deaf students, the situation requires the presence of interpreter-professors (IPs) who have a command of both languages. In this specific case of artistic training, the question of the diversity of languages (with considerable use of photographs, videos, diagrams and films) becomes a crucial point. This is for two reasons: first, because images are a

* The “Learning in order to Teach” Project is part of the MAM-SP Educational Department’s Equal Different Program. From 2002 to 2007, the project was carried out in partnership with the preschool and elementary school for deaf children and youth – Department of Education and Rehabilitation for Communication Disturbances (DERDIC) at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo. In 2008, “Learning in order to Teach” broadened its partnerships. Currently, students and professionals at DERDIC, the Rio Branco School for Deaf Children, the Bradesco Foundation, Radial School and the Santa Terezinha Institute take part in the program.

language that do not assume previous literacy in order to be understood; and second, because the object being studied is the art itself.

The experience of an annual course with deaf students (and all the staff of hearing professors, deaf professors and interpreters) brings about a significant change in the relationship between the deaf community and the museum community. It makes mutual learning possible and, with this, provides the opportunity to initiate a new topic of study: the interpretation of works of art by a community that communicates through a visual language. By investigating how art interpretation happens through visual language, it is possible to observe the way knowledge acquired in the space of the museum interferes in the cultural context of a specific community.

The relationship between the museum and the participants' schools is transformed, given that the IPs are linked to these same schools. This increases the quality of the interpretation. These professors, who accompany the project each year, create a strong interest in contemporary art as well as in the informal education provided by the museum. The discoveries of students and professors have an impact on the school: professors of other subjects often notice art's ability to create discussion and thought and problematize situations. For example, using MAM exhibits as a starting point, history teachers explained the holocaust, physics teachers talked about optics, and literature teachers talked about concrete poetry.

On the other hand, this broadened space draws the deaf community closer to a space that is visited by many people. This helps others to understand that Libras is not just a simple mixture of visual signs; rather, it is a language of complex semiology, the learning of which allows access to infinite dimensions of thought and meanings. This is a great thing that was learned from this process.

Before starting the continuous work with the deaf public, we were unaware of the linguistic challenges this public deals with in order to communicate. For many years, the deaf were considered legally "incapable" and schools and educational centers in different parts of the world prohibited sign language. The deaf were forced to speak like "the" hearing or "the language of" the hearing. All communication had to be oral.

According to Oliver Sacks,⁵ the deaf were condemned to an abyss because of a lasting and mistaken Aristotelian concept that "symbols had to be spoken". The fact that the deaf did not have a "first language" denied them the capacity to communicate and thus harmed their acquiring of knowledge.

The development of oral speech by the deaf, without other previous communication resources, meant a long and arduous task. In addition to requiring a hearing professor for each deaf student, this process generated a speech capacity that quickly digressed intensive teaching was interrupted.

The millennial existence of strictly written languages was not enough to spread the notion that the understanding of ideas does not depend on the sound of the words. In fact, this is a strange notion for most people. However, perceiving this is fundamental for the development of deaf language as a way of access to culture.

In spite of having proven that the deaf who studied in schools where sign language was used were as capable of developing speech as were deaf people educated in normal schools, and in addition to the former having superior scholastic achievement, sign language continued to face many prohibitions. The success of educating the deaf through sign languages even inverted the situation, feeding the belief that they could develop speech without needing to learn sign language.⁶

When allowed, sign languages were the victims of another recurring error – it was thought that they did not have a grammar of their own and that they always followed the structure of spoken language. Even today many people believe that Libras is a type of "signed" Portuguese.

According to linguist Élie Bajard, contrary to the belief that was in place until the end of the 19th century, it is thought that the language used by the deaf community "is a true language, with a unique lexicon and grammar. [...] It is natural, this means, an instrument created by a slow process of elaboration, through the communicative experience of several generations within the same community, and not by one lone inventor, as in the case of Esperanto, for example. Carried out through the use of gestures, it is a language that makes thought and communication possible. It is commonplace to attribute a low capacity of abstraction to the deaf, using the argument of the limitations of abstract signs. We can note two exceptions to this type of commentary: first, many communication difficulties can be attributed to the late acquisition of language; secondly, sign language limitations can find their origin in a particular use by a community, and not in the supposed insufficiency of a gestural language."

In Brazil, in spite of being used and taught for quite some time, Libras was only recognized in 2002 as a legal form of communication.⁷

Despite the question of deaf language being an old one, this reflection shows that its resolution (or the beginning of resolution) is quite recent. The fact that it continues to occur points to the public dimension of our work, as well as the social relevance of preparing deaf educators.

We believe that art plays a fundamental role in the transformation of how one sees in relation to the world. Through art, we can establish meaningful relationships among theoretical content and contemporary culture. An individual’s critical ability can be improved by stimulating a critical perspective, seeking to notice the differing cultural meanings entangled in the vast quantity of images with which we come into contact daily.

On contemporary art education, Michael Parsons says: “Works of art are powerful incarnations of common interests, they ask for an active interpretation, they can unite different ways of thought, they relate to different contexts and they are susceptible to multiple interpretations. For these reasons, the study of art promotes, in its highest sophistication, the kind of understanding that is demanded by a pluralist society, in which groups can coexist with different histories, values and points of view. This, I believe, establishes the teaching and research in art education” (Parsons,⁸ p. 9).

Museums and cultural spaces are privileged locations for the development of critical-interpretive processes. The innovative aspect in the social relationships that can be established between a museum or cultural space and a community is the elaboration of mediation strategies that allow the distance to be broken between spectator and work of art, spectator and artist, spectator and museum or cultural space. Roles are thus demystified and a type of link is created through which occurs the appropriation of knowledge created in relationship with art.

There are several ways of constructing the mediation that results from the interaction of the educator with the group visiting the exhibit. One of these ways is to request that the group ask questions about that which they are seeing. In this way, the curiosity of the visitors will contribute to the developing the path. Questions become the basis of learning.

In the case of a continuous training course like “Learning in order to Teach”, the questions of the deaf students who participated in the course can become the same questions that they will ask the groups of deaf visitors who will come to the exhibit in the future. In this case, acting as mediators, the educator-learners appropriate the creative dimension and meaning of their own experience as their questions become the same ones asked in order to draw in the other.

Developing strategies that break down distances and give way to encountering the other makes the educative work itself a creative path in which the artist-educators (or artist-educator-apprentices) do not have a neutral view with regard to the works of art and the exhibit. They propose positions and sensations. They build meanings. They are conscious that the relationship with art, which is to be developed, deepened and even theorized, first of all passes through the dimension of experience (which implies taking social, cultural and political places, life histories, etc. into consideration).

By going through meaningful experiences, such as conversations with artists, curators and other different characters that make up the universe of art and museums (educators, people from the archives, security guards, set-up staff), the students’ questions and the answers that they find remain as conceptual axes and problematizations throughout the year. Thus, when they are assisted at the exhibits by the museum’s artist-educators or when they, as “apprentice-educators”, assist other groups, the “Learning in order to Teach” students establish different connections between that which they are seeing or “teaching to see” and the experiences of interchange that originate in the conversations had during the project. In this way, the character of mediation itself is broadened.

When articulation between content and approximation strategies with the art and the museum takes place, the mediation is successful, and proliferation of knowledge occurs in both directions (from museum to society and vice-versa). Therefore, the importance of reflecting on and discussing mediation is crucial, given that within it resides the possibility of the art museum being modified by the people and communities that visit it, thus making it truly a public space. In the case of the deaf community, when the experience is meaningful, reaching its specific cultural context, it also becomes a linguistic discussion.

According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “the definition of art in any society is never wholly intra-aesthetic, and indeed but rarely more than marginally so. The chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force, in whatever form and in result of whatever skill it may come, is how to place it within the other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life. And such placing, the giving to art objects a cultural significances is always a local matter [...]”⁹ (Geertz,¹⁰ p.146),

If the definition of art is related to a cultural context of production and of reception, as Geertz believes, what are the specificities of the dialog with the deaf community within an artistic institution? How does the cultural dimension affect the construction of the mediator figure in this project, and in what way is mediation understood and practiced?

For Élie Bajard, sign language, which is based on a gestural emission and a visual reception, is different from the oral language of the hearing, which is emitted by the mouth and received by the ears. The understanding of the world is thus clearly differentiated. The cultural difference of the deaf person is not manifested only through the lack of hearing, but also through an understanding of the world based on a specific configuration of the senses, through the dominance of a unique gestural language, through early access to a second language (Portuguese).

If language is man's instrument to see and understand the world, and if, reciprocally, this instrument is shaped by human experience, culture and language are intrinsically linked to one another. The sentient relationship with the universe, the body and people is profoundly distinct in a world of sounds and in a world of "silence". The world of the deaf is defined by an absence of sounds. Their experience of silence improves the quality of the other senses, particularly the perception of the sight and touch. It is important to consider that the relationship of a deaf person with the world is, first of all, different, and not mutilated. In addition to this, the use of a language with gestural meanings creates a specific sensitivity, different from the sensitivity of those who hear and share the same daily routines. This specific culture, claimed by the deaf community, requires recognition by those who hear.

The "Learning in order to Teach" project includes two phases. The first is the educator training course, an annual process that involves APs, IPs and students. The second is the moment in which the students who have already completed the course serve as apprentice-educators. In other words, it is the moment in which each student acts as a mediator, receiving groups of deaf visitors at the MAM-SP exhibits.

Being a training course for those who will in turn train, we do not just mediate the relationship between the student and the "art", but rather their relationship with "education". This means that, throughout the teaching and learning process, experiencing and understanding "art" (as shape and content) are activities that are just as important as the conscious understanding of the strategies and principles used by the APs. Therefore, in this project, the possibility of interpreting the works of art takes on a unique radical nature: what is produced along the way among the languages and in the relationship between this way and art is the enrichment of Libras itself. This occurs when we present words, notions and concepts for which there are no translations, thus making it necessary to invent signs so that the students can share with the groups that receive these new learnings.¹¹ With this, these are not merely new signs that are being created, but a new cartography of affections, desires and knowledge that open up and can be experienced, given that these signs spread quickly, enriching not only the language, but also the territory itself where the deaf culture circulates and makes itself present.

The "Learning in order to Teach" Project proves that the act of mediating should be understood in a broad sense, encompassing aspects which are not only related to education and (in this case) art, but also to the cultural transformations that the encounters between different agents and social spaces bring about.

Attachments

The reflections present in this article are the fruit of the project experience and of systematic reflective conversations among the professionals involved.¹² The conversations were recorded and transcribed. Parts of the dialogs are here in order to illustrate the path the work took. The professionals who were involved are: artist-professors Joana Zatz and Cibele Lucena (MAM-SP), project coordinator Daina Leyton (MAM-SP), professor-interpreters and DERDIC teachers Regina Pinheiro and Carolina Blumer, and linguist researcher Élie Bajard, who has accompanied the project since 2005.

Demystifying the museum, art and creativity

Joana: For me, it is interesting to investigate the student's situation as an interviewer of the different people that make up the museum's universe. The first thing that comes to my mind is the notion of investigation-action, the idea of investigating a space that is neither dead nor ready, but that is being constructed and of which the students are a part. The interview strategy brings the understanding into a

context, which means, for example, understanding art not as a school subject, but as something that is cut across by everything, not fragmented. This leads to a horizontal nature of knowledge, in the sense that they [the students] feel like subjects of this construction, realizing that they can talk with the curator or the artist and that their ideas are not ready, they are being constructed. With regard to orality, they notice that things are really being sewn together there at the moment and that they can be a part of knowledge construction. Student interviews with artists – as took place with Daniel Lima, Laura Vinci, Rodrigo Araújo and Nelson Félix – are like an apex of this concern that experience and formalization always be connected. For us, just as important as the specific contents of the exhibits is to create impacting experiences, for only in this way can the students transform the encounters with the groups into new experiences, not just into content transmission.

Élie: And what did you discover, afterwards, based on the reflections about these experiences?

Joana: We realized that it is not our intention that students necessarily see artists or educators, but that they see themselves as subjects that can create their own representations, their own devices, their own lives and ways of life.

Daina: And what are the elements of their lives that are brought to class and how is this done?

Regina: I am going to give an example – the work of art entitled “Alvo”¹³ from the Argentinean group GAC, which we worked with in different ways in the course, including meeting with a group of artists, is the type of work of art that only has meaning when someone is an actor, when someone does; in a greater sense, the work of art happens when someone completes it. In one of the photographs of the targets in Germany,¹⁴ the company name Siemens appeared and a student asked: “That’s the brand of my hearing aid, why does someone feel like a target of this brand, of this corporation?” You brought up an interesting piece of data, explaining that Siemens supports weapons production. What gets my attention from this work in the museum is that it is a great unleasher of experiences. Be it in the form of increasing vocabulary, when we speak of language, be it to broaden critical vision and thought about everyday life, the city, contextualizing.

Cibele: These are examples of strategies for filling empty space with world experience. In one of the classes where we talked about the freedom that exists in contemporary art, a student asked: “Is walking down the street wearing different clothes art?” Through this question, we proposed that they do an artistic action using strange clothes. This proposal turned into an intervention in the Bienal building and into a studio proposal with school groups. This has to do with what Joana was saying about demystification, horizontalizing the creative experience. We talked about intervention, subversion, they realized that these ideas are important for contemporary art. We explored the museum’s spaces several times and they shaped what they discovered in the investigations, which had the following instructions: “In groups, go to the library, where you will find books about contemporary artists on the table. Look at the books and read excerpts that get your attention. Based on what you discover, work in groups to create a poetic synthesis that reflects what you discovered in your research.” Based on these instructions, they made an installation with the books in the library, they hung coats on the shelves, thus making a performance there, then they thought about how to take this to the visiting students, not necessarily repeating the same shape, but recreating based on what they had discovered.

Élie: The structure of all these strategies that you are describing is a question in a broad sense. And what you are saying is that the education in the “Learning in order to Teach” Project is all based on the identification and expression of the students’ own questions and expectations.

Translated by Robert Gartner

Notes and references

¹ Translator’s note: “Libras” is the acronym used in Portuguese for Brazilian Sign Language and stands for “Lingua Brasileira de Sinais”

² Within the MAM Educational Department, educators who accompany groups in their visits to the exhibits as well as professors of continuing education courses are professionals who also develop personal creative work. Educational activity is therefore understood and experienced as a “creative precursor”, with aesthetic and plastic qualities and a potentially innovative characteristic. It is for this reason that we refer to these professionals as artist-educators (AE) and artist-professors (AP).

³ According to linguist Élie Bajard (in an article written at the request of MAM, but not yet published), “[...] the deaf who are born to hearing parents face the difficult situation of not inheriting the language of their family. In order to conquer sign language, a deaf child must, imperatively, live within a community of deaf children. Thus, before being diagnosed and before having contact with this community, the child does not have a mother tongue. Frequenting the deaf community of an educational institution, he/she learns a ‘first

language'. Afterwards, in the literacy phase, the child discovers Portuguese as a 'second language'." Therefore, we will use the concepts of "first language" and "second language", which apply better to the deaf than do the concepts of mother tongue and foreign language.

- ⁴ In 2005 Bajard wrote an article about his research on the "Learning in order to Teach" Project at the request of MAM. The article has not yet been published and has only circulated internally.
- ⁵ Oliver Sacks (1998), *Vendo vozes. Uma viagem ao mundo dos surdos*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras.
- ⁶ In an important International Conference of Educators for the Deaf, which took place in Milan in 1880, oralism was the winner and the use of sign language was officially banned in schools (see Sacks, 1998, p.40).
- ⁷ In accordance with Law number 10.436, created in 2002 and sanctioned in 2005, Brazilian Sign Language is understood as the form of communication and expression in which the linguistic system of a visual-motor nature, with its own grammatical structure, constitutes a linguistic system of transmitting ideas and facts, originating in communities of deaf people in Brazil. Institutionalized forms of supporting the use and spread of Libras as an objective means of communication and of common use within Brazil's deaf communities should be guaranteed by public authorities and companies granted concessions to provide public services.
- ⁸ Michael Parsons (1996), *Changing Directions in Contemporary Art Education*, keynote speech at the national ANPAP Congresso on Art and Research in São Paulo, Brazil, October.
- ⁹ Translator's note: Although the Portuguese version of this article consulted the Geertz text in Portuguese, as noted in the Bibliographical References, the translator chose to include the text as found in English and available at: http://www.iwp.unilinz.ac.at/lxe/sektktf/GG/GeertzTexts/Art_Cultural.htm.
- ¹⁰ Clifford Geertz (1999), *O saber local*. Petrópolis, Vozes.
- ¹¹ Some of these conceptualizations for which it was necessary to create signs are fixed. In other words, they are repeated throughout the years because they are constant themes of the course, like for example, "contemporary art" and "contemporary education". Others appear and have to be investigated and discussed according to the exhibits showing at MAM like, for example, "anthropophagy", "panorama", "identity", "displacement", etc.
- ¹² The opinions expressed in the declarations cited here are the responsibility of those individuals who made them.
- ¹³ Translator's note: The title means "target" in English.
- ¹⁴ This work was presented at the Collective and Creative exhibit, which took place at the Kunsthall and Fridericianum Museum in Kassel, Germany from May 1 to June 17, 2005.
- ¹⁴ Élie Bajard (not yet published). "Esquemas de comunicação no projeto Aprender para Ensinar". Observation research of the "Learning in order to Teach" Project, sponsored by Brazilian Steelworks and Mining Company. Internal circulation.

Authors

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