

Visual Feeling: Creating and Developing Resources in Museums to Improve Awareness of and Accessibility for Visually Impaired Audiences

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The Art of Introspection: Leading from within

‘Das Unheimliche’: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Art of Introspection’. In January 2021, I devised a research project under this title to apply for the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship. Over a year has now passed and I am coming to the end of the programme. The purpose of this reflective essay is to suggest how the idea of ‘introspection’ not only was the focus of my research project, but largely shaped my outlook throughout the two years of this initiative, namely regarding my understanding of leadership and what it means to be a ‘leader’. The word ‘introspection’ now resonates with me in a way that took various routes over the course of the project.

The Laidlaw Scholarship invites its scholars to have a positive real world impact. Indeed, an integral part of leadership concerns the impact that you have on others and your environment. However, I would like to stress that such an effect cannot truly be experienced by others unless such a leadership journey originates from knowing yourself. Being ‘introspective’ is not so much a task that can simply be completed, but is an ongoing process that must be constantly reviewed. I do not believe that someone is a fixed ‘type’ of leader; leading is a malleable process and adopting an introspective approach is what allows you to take control over that process – by *leading from within*.

On revisiting my application for this scholarship, I am somewhat surprised by my idea of leadership. I wrote extensively about the various roles that I have had and how essential the scholarship was as an opportunity for me to enrich my leadership skills for my future career aspirations. What is missing from my application statement was an attempt to reflect on what leadership meant to me and *why* I took on the roles that I did. This question of ‘why’ has been a key focus for the author Simon Sinek. Under his concept of the ‘Golden Circle’, Sinek argues that while all organisations know what they do, and some know how they do it, very few know exactly *why* they do what they do.¹ This suggests that matters of introspection and the importance of taking the time to consider, discuss and inform others about the motivations, beliefs and reasons behind their activities are often overlooked by the organisations themselves.

Applying Sinek’s model to the various leadership positions that I have undertaken in the past has allowed me to identify a recurring motivation behind them. Throughout the five years that I have been volunteering as a Young Producer for English Heritage, the reason why I engaged with so many projects stemmed from a desire to inspire and help young people across the country to engage with their history, and to promote youth voice as the future of our heritage sites. Rendering these sites accessible and appealing to such an audience is of great personal importance to me and continues to underpin my engagement with the organisation.

The idea of accessibility largely inspired my Leadership in Action project: ‘Visual Feeling: Creating and Developing Resources in Museums to Improve Awareness of and Accessibility for Visually Impaired Audiences’. Although primarily based at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, I also fostered a partnership with the Centraal Museum, in the Netherlands, for the

¹ [Simon Sinek: How great leaders inspire action | TED Talk](#)

first week of my project. Through this, I sought to gain a better insight into the international scope of audience engagement initiatives and how this museum in particular is working towards developing facilities for the visually impaired. Improving accessibility is a relatively new area of focus in the art world; museums and galleries are increasingly directing their attention to rendering collections and displays accessible for a range of audiences, exploring class, race, gender and sexuality. One audience that is yet to achieve sufficient recognition or support is the visually impaired.

Something that I noticed from the outset of my project was the sense of surprise that people expressed when I explained my project to them. Some common responses were confusion why visually impaired people would visit museums and galleries and a lack of awareness regarding the opportunities and resources available to this group. However, such reactions only increased the motivation behind my project, fuelling my aim to bolster awareness of this audience and

improve the resources available to them. My idea of ‘visual feeling’ was paramount to the project. This is the concept that experiencing art is by no means a purely perceptual process; through developing the various resources for my audience to experience art, I have learnt that art does not close its borders to those without sight. It can be felt and responded to in ways that are yet to be fully recognised and championed in artistic organisations. Aesthetic experience transcends the visual – feeling becomes seeing. For the renowned artist Pablo Picasso, ‘Painting is a blind man’s profession. He doesn’t paint what he sees but what he feels’. Through my LiA project, I wanted to demonstrate that not only is the process of experiencing art a matter of seeing, but feeling it is as well.

Art can be felt and engaged with in multiple ways; it only requires organisations such as museums and galleries to create and offer the necessary resources to those without sight so that they can experience art in alternative ways. Something that is often forgotten when considering visual impairment is that sight is not binary, but highly complex. We are not simply sighted or blind; from interacting with various members of this audience and from hearing their respective stories, visual impairment, I have learnt, can refer to those who previously had sight but are experiencing visual deterioration, those who are colour blind, those who are blind now but can remember what it was like to see, and those who were born without sight. This was a fundamental consideration when I was delivering my workshops at the end of my project, namely regarding the language I used to speak about the works that I had selected (images below), how I interacted with each person, and the resources that I made specifically available to certain audience members.

“...the music and props made it a more three-dimensional experience...they added a good level of understanding that helped me appreciate the paintings more, and they were very well explained.”
- Workshop Audience Member



Image 1: Thomas Gainsborough, *George Drummond*, c.1779-82

Image 2: Clara Peeters, *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers*, 1612-13

Image 3: Matthias Stom, *Blowing Hot, Blowing Cold*, c.1640

From my DiSC and Belbin reports and the various leadership days hosted by the St Andrews Laidlaw Team, I have become far more aware of myself as a leader, the type of leadership skills I possess and those which I want to cultivate in order to become a better leader. Through the range of activities organised for my cohort, I came to appreciate the various forms of leadership, their respective attributes and how these ‘types’ interact. Indeed, one of the most valuable aspects of the sessions, through discussing the extensive array of leadership behaviours with the other scholars, was not only my personal style of leadership (as calculated by the report), but rather my improved understanding of how I am best able to interact with other ‘leader types’. As previously mentioned, for me, these are not self-contained, but highly fluid and it is the mark of successful leadership when the individual is able to draw on certain leadership characteristics in a given situation.

The report confirmed but also illuminated several ideas that I had regarding my character, working style and attitude towards others. I am logical, questioning, conscientious and strive for high quality outcomes. However, I also tend to be overly-analytic, cautious and doubtful, accounting for my preference for independent work. In my application for my project, I described my aim to ‘become more open to others’ ideas and contributions, more spontaneous and less occupied with over-thinking smaller tasks’. Having now completed my project, I believe that I did indeed become more spontaneous and open-minded. One of the most notable challenges I faced at the outset of my project was, ironically, the level of independence expected from me. I was rendered almost chiefly responsible for how I executed my project in an entirely unfamiliar working environment; there was an expectation of me and my understanding of working in a museum that I had not anticipated.

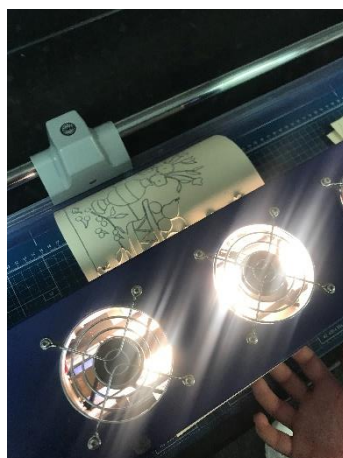
However, in retrospect, this strengthened both my project and myself as a leader. I became far more flexible and cultivated a different kind of independence. This was not the contained, individual style of working that I previously mentioned, but rather an independence that

“Without the audio tours, I would be unable to benefit at all from any museum and I appreciate your efforts immensely.”
- Workshop Audience Member

involved a new sense of authority, self-assurance and motivation. I strengthened my ability to recognise the need for advice or team-work where necessary, to take the initiative in certain circumstances and to take risks. This fostered a far greater sense of resilience and determination in my work ethic as well as my capacity to operate as a communicator, namely in my relations with the

staff working alongside me and my ability to ask questions. This deeper sense of introspection enriched my concept of leadership. There is a common misconception that leaders are all-knowing. Rather, it is knowing when to ask others and seek advice or assistance that crafts the most effective team, fosters a stronger working environment and delivers the optimal results.

A more personal aim was to advance my public speaking skills. One of the requirements for the LiA project is to place yourself in a challenging environment. As well as requiring an international dimension to the scholar’s project, I also felt this ‘challenging aspect’ in terms of my working environment and the tasks that I would set myself. Indeed, the intended outcome of my project was to be able to deliver a series of workshops to my target audience in the museum itself (I later extended my outreach to the Oxfordshire Association for the Blind, where I also delivered the workshops: images below). I made full use of the five weeks that I spent at the Ashmolean in order to ensure that I had a real-life impact for my target audience: from shadowing tours to the public led by museum staff; interviewing numerous curators and museum staff regarding their relation with this audience; directly interacting and working with my audience in order to ascertain a stronger idea of their needs and desires; carrying out extensive training in order that I might fulfil their needs to the best of my ability, to carrying out detailed image research in the archival department on a select number of paintings that I had chosen from the collection.



Far Left:
 Workshop setup at the OAB
 Left:
 Developing a raised image using a lightbox
 Above:
 Workshop resource box

The resources that I offered my audience in the workshops were not simply to provide them with alternative methods of ‘looking’ at art, but, importantly, I was asking them to question their assumptions about what experiencing art is. Creating these resources and delivering the workshops refined my own manner of engaging with and speaking about art. Without the capacity to look, experiencing my selected works became a matter of ‘feeling’. For this, I created a number of raised images of the artworks; these are, in the words of one of my audience members, “maps” of the painting. Using swell paper, raised images create relief outlines of the painting in order that the individual may ‘feel’, rather than look at, the content of the work. In my workshops I also played a short extract of music that had been composed at the time that the artist was active. Object handling was a significant component of these workshops, allowing the audience to focus on certain elements of the painting and explore its texture. From my extensive research into the paintings, I provided an in-depth talk on each work, discussing its context, the artist’s life, my own interpretation and art-historical analysis of the work and, most importantly, a visual description of the painting.

“The presenter did a lovely back-story to the picture which really brought it to life.”
- *Workshop Audience Member*

My art-historical training up until this point has largely been focused on context, historical significance and iconographical analysis. However, exploring these works in such a sensory manner fosters an entirely new level of communication between person and object. Describing the fine detail of the works, often including elements that

those with sight would often glance over, enriched my appreciation for the works and, as I came to learn, required a new skill-set entirely. Ultimately, the workshops did not merely provide visually impaired individuals with the opportunity to experience art, but encouraged me to practise a far deeper level of looking. The manner of focus and the specialised skills that I was able to develop by working with this audience are things that, I now believe, all art historians and visitors would benefit from, not simply those who are visually impaired.

The experiences that I had over the course of my LiA project have been invaluable. In response to the feedback questionnaires I devised, the results revealed notable similarities. 100% of those who attended my workshops said that whilst they were previously largely unaware of the resources available to visually impaired visitors, the workshops that I delivered in the final week of my project raised their awareness of the opportunities available to them to experience art. All confirmed that they now feel more confident in attending future sessions. Following the two-year long pandemic that meant that so many facilities, including those available to visually impaired individuals, were made inaccessible to the public, the workshops I delivered were the first to be offered since before the pandemic. I feel honoured to have been given the opportunity to work with this audience, with the Ashmolean museum and to have made a positive real-world impact.

I would like to now thank Lord Laidlaw, the Foundation and the St Andrews Laidlaw Team for providing me with the opportunity to work with such a fantastic cause and with such an exceptional museum as the Ashmolean. I would encourage all those who will embark on this scholarship in the future to take the time for self-reflection throughout their project. I want to reassert what I proposed at the outset of this essay, which is this: whether it is academic research or a task where you are taking on a leading role, taking moments to consider how you are changing and developing, and accepting those changes, will enrich your awareness

not only of your personal capabilities, but how you are best able to interact with and adapt to others. There is nothing fixed or rigid about what we do and who we are – what is important is allowing yourself to recognise that leadership is not a matter of finishing, but rather is a process of growth and discovery about both yourself and others. This realisation has most definitely revealed to me the worth of at least starting this journey by *leading from within*.