Chapter 15 Dreams and wishes: the multi-sensory museum space

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I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." … on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. … my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. … down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

(King 1963) [my emphasis]

YOU! YOU UGLY SHIT! DOG SHIT! YOU! YOU! YOU LOVE THAT DOG SHIT! YOU’RE UGLY DOG SHITS! …

(Anon. 1968)

Introduction

This chapter explores the multi-sensory experiences and embodied knowledge(s) that can be gained with a range of material culture housed in an anthropology museum. The chapter focuses on embodied engagement with objects that are regarded as ‘art’ (a
contested zone) originating from Sub-Saharan Africa peoples, in both traditional and contemporary communities, which are displayed in the internationally curated permanent exhibition entitled *African Worlds*, at Horniman Museum South London. Attention is directed to young children’s creativity flowing from innovative affective experiences related to touch, sound, balance and dance, time and space, healing and wellbeing, which are all made possible in *African Worlds*.

Specifically sensory engagement with objects on display such as a small Shona headrest (c.1900 by an anonymous maker) that could fit the human hands, is shown to be enhanced through direct physical engagement with objects in the Handling Collection. Feeling links between the materiality or thingness of museum objects, and the mindful creative work they can inspire is developed throughout the chapter, by considering playful active learning experiences in both the museum but also at school. In addition to emphasizing the tangible material culture exhibited in the museum and in the handling collection the value of employing contextual material, such as traditional stories and songs, to further the children’s embodied experiences is explored. The importance of prompting communication, through non-verbal body language, oral exchange in dialogue, creative writing and artwork are key to the projects discussed. Furthermore such prompts are beneficial to all young children, and particularly those suffering emotional difficulties on the autistic spectrum, as will be considered below.

In sum the communicative potential of material culture facilitated by a non-hierarchical teamwork approach that establishes twenty-first century emotional and intellectual connections, with peoples and cultures, teachers and pupils, past and present, in a spirit
of openness and sharing is explored. Theoretically the collaborative ethos underpinning
the chapter outlines a critical pedagogy informed by Paulo Freire, to challenge the
stubborn persistence of dualism inherent at the basis of Western thought but without
resorting to a relativist ‘anything goes’ approach Paulo Freire (Freire 1985, 1998).
Rather ‘both and’ holistic ways of being and knowing to promote greater intercultural
understanding and self-understanding are emphasised.

The chapter is structured to address the key points of sensory engagement and
promotion of embodied knowledge in the museum, the wider context of which I have
covered elsewhere (Golding 2007a, b, c; 2006; 2005). First the key terms (the senses,
emotions, intellectual and socio-political engagement across time and space), are more
tightly defined and problematised, with language(s), for example, considered from an
embodied perspective. Next I will sketch the Horniman Museum context and outline the
aims and object of the African Worlds exhibition, and routes to engaging with visitors
notably children. From this I will observe one case study group of disabled school
pupils, their special learning needs and the value of the multi-sensory museum/school
programming. Finally some conclusions are drawn and recommendations made for
developing embodied knowledge(s) with anthropology collections at other museums
around the globe.

Making sense
Constance Classen observes how the senses are ordered by and underpin all cultures
with sensory models shaping lives. For example in the twenty-first century Western
world within which I am writing, it is the ‘eye minded’ philosophy and that came to
dominance in the eighteenth century that continues to dominate thought. It was in the
Age of Enlightenment that the earlier importance of smell positioned alongside sight
was displaced. Perfume, once a metaphor for truth now has only cosmetic value while
vision reveals truth and is privileged in the museum. Classen points out that the
opposition between sight and smell is relatively recent, referring to Shakespeare’s
words: ‘A rose by any other name would smell as sweet’ – not ‘look as beautiful’
(Classen 1993: 25).

My enterprise in this chapter involves stepping outside the contemporary European
ordering of just five senses, with the sense of sight positioned at the apex of
‘civilization’ followed by the aural, while smell, taste and touch are regarded as ‘lower
senses’ associated with ‘lower races’ (Classen and Howes 2006: 199-206). Specifically
in the context of the 21st century anthropology museum, what seems to be required
from a personal positioning of ten years experience within museum/school education, is
a fundamental acknowledgment that different cultures have unique ways of valuing,
combining and ordering the senses commonly noted in the west, as well as recognizing
a wider range of senses such as balance and proprioception (Guerts 2005: 166). A
further contention is that material culture may be employed to ‘dignify and engage’ the
senses across cultures, to permit a richer appreciation of the inextricable
interrelationship between the ‘imagination and reason’ based upon ‘experience’ in the

In other words I shall explore ways of opening the museum to diverse ‘worlds of sense’
(Classen 1993). I argue that the human body and the senses, although they are counted
and ordered differently around the globe – are fundamental to our common humanity –
to personhood, and to the socio-cultural construction of embodied knowledge the world
over (Stoller 1989: 95; Classen 1993; Howes 2005). Thus while the chapter highlights
the senses and emotions it does not denounce reason; rather, it operates at a ‘frontier’
space of learning, which is politico-philosophically motivated (Golding 2005; 2006;
2007a, b, c). Language is key to understanding this frontier region of embodied
knowledge and to ‘safeguard against purely emotional outbursts that militate against
debate’ (Younger 2008: 29).

Language and emotion

In delineating a particular notion of embodiment and intention, I cite language as a
prime feature of humankind. Language can be said to involve all the senses; writing is a
tactile act and speech is not only auditory but also kinesthetic and olfactory, being
‘carried on the breath’ (Classen 1993: 50). Language arises out of the body, whether
from ‘lips dripping’ with hatred and division or from the desire for unity and love as Dr
Martin Luther King, Jr ‘Dream’ speech foregrounding the chapter highlights; it marks
out our humanity in a world we share, a human relation or ‘being with’ the social world
ability to manipulate ideas and communicate in language is a universal feature we may
take pride in, and the voice of King, underscores the human capacity to use speech with
intention, consciously or carelessly to celebrate or wound.1

Listening to King’s ‘Dream’ speech in 2008, forty-five years after it was delivered,
points to the importance of the oral delivery of ideas to engage feeling and intellect, to
add weight to the emotional power of words and their use as tools in the struggle for Human Rights, social justice and equality. There is a special cadence to King’s delivery that can be heard online and a lyrical repetition of the key sentiments: the emotional desire inherent in the ‘dream’ to end segregation and ‘let freedom ring’, which is most importantly rooted within the wider ‘American dream’ that sadly eludes too many African Americans who remain disadvantaged by economic poverty (Younge 2007: 5-6). The ‘grain of the voice’, which is ‘the materiality of the body speaking ... the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs’ is vital to the impact of King’s message (Barthes 1977: 182, 188).

King’s speech shows how language can profitably connect affective impulses to the world. The words of and delivery strike a pertinent balance between the emotional and the intellectual, the mind and the body, the individual and society that enables us to move beyond the ‘either-or’ of binary thought that traditionally separates emotion and reason. Similarly both emotion and critical thinking are central to the consideration of the embodied museum/school learning experience. A holistic position is taken, which regards socially constructed beliefs and value systems as central to the generation of individual emotions, and additionally perceives socio-cultural and mental linguistic factors as crucially impacting on emotional states (Svašek 2007: 229-230). This is a cross-cultural standpoint, emphasizing the emotions in a socio-cultural context and observing emotions as key to the rational making of meaning, as well as a sense of social wellbeing that closes the ‘heart versus mind debate’ and proves productive to learning (Wulff 2007: 1).
Now I feel my own emotions – predominantly fear and anger – rising, when I recall the words ‘... UGLY DOG SHITS ...’ cited above. In contrast with King delivery, the second abusive speech was vehemently hurled at me – who usually ‘passes for white’ – and at my Black woman friend from St Kitts by an unknown drunken ‘man on the Clapham omnibus’ as we travelled to see ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream.’ This speech was not my first personal experience of racism, but the extreme vehemence with which it was delivered – the words spluttering like wet bullets searing right into flesh, eyes, lips – as well as the particular time in my teenage life at which it came, was a particularly shocking instance of racial hatred intruding into our lives of economic poverty, which indelibly marked my thought – an epiphany, a sudden intuitive leap of understanding – pointing to a personal dream of solidarity and the necessity of standing firm in opposition to injustice (Freire 1985; 1998).

**Objects and the dream theme**

A ‘dream’, an ideal in King’s speech, resonates in the liberatory museum praxis I have been developing and is the theme of a museum/school project I discuss presently. Just as King’s dream text is inclusive – making positive connections between peoples today while acknowledging histories of oppression, rousing the intellect and the emotions towards the dream of a brighter future – so his passionate oral delivery has an electrifying effect on the audience who are included in a preaching tradition that recalls African ‘call and response’ modes of communication and musical forms; forms that I shall demonstrate being effectively employed to promote stronger connections between pupils in London and African collections displayed in their local museum.
As King draws connections between people and the land – the ‘red hills of Georgia’ – I explore connections between people and space, past and present times, through the sensory threshold of objects housed in the museum. Additionally, as King spatially connects his stance with earlier freedom fighters, noting the historical site where he stands and delivers his words – the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC – to highlight the importance of Black and white people marching ahead together to dismantle the barriers of racial inequality, to break the ‘manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination’, so the collaborative programming discussed here is crucially delivered by a multiracial team who endeavour to shatter the barriers to access for a group of disabled pupils.

Objects are located at the heart of liberatory educational programming and provide sensual routes to knowledge construction at the museum and the school. Objects like language move with people across time and space, and the meanings humans attach to things shift all the while, which leads to objects being ‘imagined and experienced as emotional agents’ by the pupils able to ‘challenge, anger and please’ (Svašek 2007: 230). In the next section I examine how thoughtful programming with museum objects can prompt dialogical exchange and communication that is problematic for autistic pupils, as well as progress ‘community cohesion’ by illuminating a common vision, a mutual sense of belonging and equality of life opportunities. First I offer an outline of the museum/school fieldsite where the multisensory programmes took place.

*African Worlds* and ‘Inspiration Africa!’ at the Horniman Museum, London, UK

*African Worlds* is distinctive in employing a variety of innovative techniques to enhance the communicative power of the wonderful objects, historical and modern, which comprise it. The objects are treated as art and displayed according to aesthetic principles, but together with layers of contextual information to engage different levels of interest as well as portraits of the 25 voices quoted to personalise the text. This humanizing exhibitionary ethos was seen as important to positively revalue the cultural traditions of Africa and present a counter view to the widespread notions of famine and ‘primitive otherness’ that continue to be perpetuated in the media and which has such a detrimental affect on children of African Caribbean heritage (Gilborn 1995). Archive and contemporary video, music and photographs impart rich thematic ‘glimpses’ of African unity in diversity, contrasting strongly with the geographically homogenizing effect of earlier, more simplistic displays (Shelton 2001).

The exhibition’s designer, Michael Cameron, used theatrical techniques to engage the viewer: for example key objects – characterized as ‘heroes’ by the exhibition team – are spot lit and set as if against a stage of warm earthy red colours, to excellent dramatic effect (Shelton 2001). In figure 15.1, a group of Shona headrests can be seen to the left with Ashanti stools, some displayed on their sides, which prompts attention to the
sculptural forms behind the fronts of the glass and steel cases. However, while drama in the theatre invites emotional responses by drawing on costume and the live voice, in the aesthetic display space it is predominantly ‘eyes and minds’ that are made most ‘welcome, [while] space-occupying bodies’ are usually less so (O’Doherty 1976: 15). It is to more holistic mind and body experiences during ‘Inspiration Africa!’ programming that I turn next.4

‘Inspiration Africa!’ - a £72,000 DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) funded collaborative programme jointly managed by Horniman Museum and the Cloth of Gold Arts Company – engaged twelve schools in twelve object-based projects over a two-year period of intensive research and creative activity.5 A major aim of ‘Inspiration Africa!’ was to draw connections between the museum objects displayed in Horniman’s African Worlds exhibition and the everyday lives of the individual pupils and the wider community, histories and futures. Similarly, while each school approached the ‘Inspiration Africa!’ project via intensive engagement with one particular key object and one specific key theme, all twelve schools also had the opportunity to engage with other objects in the museum and with the wider ‘Inspiration Africa!’ community through the dedicated website and the construction of the collaborative virtual banner.

An open, non-hierarchical ethos was a feature underpinning team-work, which directed work in a borderland space between the museum and the school where the children’s voices expressing their feelings, wishes and dreams could be heard alongside the African objects. We viewed the contact with African art in the museum not as a homogenizing force but as specifically generative and illuminating, where actual
differences, the particular cultural knowledge that inspired the making and use of the objects, might be perceived alongside similarity to progress understanding beyond limited stereotypes. Such practices demand that museum programmes proceed in multiple ways that are relevant to the present day context of the young people, making full use of their developing intellect, feelings and senses as I will demonstrate with reference to one school field-site.

**Dream Cushions: at the museum/school frontiers**

Brent Knoll School is located in the London Borough of Lewisham, a ten-minute walk from the Horniman Museum. The teachers visited the museum regularly, at least once a month, with their pupils. They prepared their classes carefully for the new ideas and objects that were encountered on consecutive visits and attempted to build up a sense of familiarity with certain exhibitions, notably the Aquarium, which was most popular.

During ‘Inspiration Africa!’ the pupils engaged in considerable emotional engagement at the museum and eventually produced the highly creative outputs shown in figure 15.2, the Dream Cushions. Brent Knoll School’s Dream Cushions, which were based on a Shona headrest (c.19th century). The ‘Inspiration Africa!’ project team leaders who facilitated these outcomes at Brent Knoll School, Lewisham included the core group: Tony Minnion as artist/project coordinator, Jacqui Callis as website developer/artist and myself as outreach workers from the Horniman Museum. This core team welcomed the Horniman Museum’s Education Officer Sheila Humbert and Amoafi Kwapong, a regular Horniman Museum story-teller/musician originally from Ghana West Africa, to
work with sixteen pupils aged nine to eleven in two Year 5 and 6 classes who were all on the autistic spectrum and had mild learning difficulties.\textsuperscript{6}

In the UK more than half a million people, from all racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds have an autism spectrum disorder, with varying degrees of severity and impact from person to person, which ranges from no speech and limited cognitive ability to high IQ and highly-focused interests and abilities. The emotional impact of autism on individuals and their families can be difficult since the autistic individual can perceive the world as a confusing and frightening place and around 30\% of children with autism have a clinically recognisable emotional or anxiety disorder.\textsuperscript{7}

Group activities and team building are valuable tools to aiding such youngsters and museums have scope to contribute much. In this instance the Brent Knoll School teachers were keen to offer advice on their pupils’ specific social impairments and to work alongside the ‘Inspiration Africa!’ team leaders. The teachers highlighted problems including: inattention, lack of spontaneous response to the emotions of others, poor ability to communicate nonverbally and to take turns in groups as listeners and speakers, which is essential to success at Key Stages 1 and 2 of the National Curriculum for English.\textsuperscript{8} They pointed out that autistic children do not prefer to be alone but highly value a limited number of quality friendships once they are forged, although they suffer difficulties in the initial stages of making and maintaining friendship bonds.

Reflecting on effective programming for their pupils, the ‘Inspiration Africa!’ team-leaders noted the need to focus on developing communication, social, and cognitive
skills. Music therapy and aromatherapy had proved to be particularly positive interventions at Brent Knoll and the importance of employing senses other than the visual was emphasized, since people with autism experience difficulty reading what are widely regarded as ‘normal’ visual traits of social communication, such as the safety and pleasure widely felt from seeing a mother’s smiling face or returning her gentle touch. It was this lack of intuition about other people and the apparent gaps in understanding the processes of social communication, which the Horniman Museum/school programming set out to address, by providing a number of stimulating pathways to social engagement and to the potential development of friendships or at least enhanced familiarity with fellow pupils.

In the first museum visit pupils were engaged in tactile experiences with a restricted range of original objects from the West African handling collection including: gourd cups, a headrest and an Ashanti stool. This selection took account of the teachers’ experience that the pupils’ attention span was limited and that they would tire easily, and so the textile wraps, hats, musical instruments and the toys were reserved for subsequent sessions. ‘Inspiration Africa!’ project team-leaders were thus concerned to enable pupils not just for collecting ‘facts’ such as the information in the museum text panels and booklets, which could be dry and difficult. For example:

Shona headrest, c. 1900, maker anonymous, wood.

Shona chief, Chief Nyoka, explained how, after having problems judging legal cases brought before him, he had commissioned a headrest for himself. By
sleeping on it, he received dreams which he found useful in helping him make decisions about his cases.

(Horniman label and booklet 2001)

As team leaders we considered this interesting and important historical information to impart, but our concern was also to facilitate pupil’s learning about how to interrogate data for a range of underlying ‘meanings’, both historical and personal. This required us to translate key messages from the text panels into child friendly language that might promote pupils’ personal meaning making and connections. Additionally Brent Knoll pupils with their particular learning needs found the theatrical museum displays rather forbidding and difficult to access – hence a ‘safe’ space where the pupils would feel a sense of belonging and homeliness was constructed to enhance this group’s experience and achievement. Bringing the Education Department’s ‘magic carpet’ – used for storytelling sessions – into the exhibition space where the key object was on display, helped to promote a cozy atmosphere conducive to dialogical exchange around objects.

The pupils were greeted warmly and gathered around for a range of multisensory experiences to develop what Howard Gardner terms their ‘multiple intelligences’, specifically their ‘bodily kinaesthetic, musical, linguistic, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences’ (Gardner 1993). In addition to these, Gardner holds that there are ‘logical-mathematical, spatial, and naturalistic intelligences’ (currently counting eight in total). Individuals are said to hold different combinations of these intelligences but, taken separately, each draws on different cognitive strengths and contrasting cognitive styles (Gardner 1993: 12). The importance of this pluralistic view
of mind lies in revaluing the western concept of intelligence as primarily concerned with the rather abstract mathematical-linguistics to the exclusion of other ways of knowing and experiencing the world through more sensory means. However, while the concept vitally challenges the notion of value attached to the limited western view of intelligence, which has disadvantaged Black and working-class children in intelligence testing systems, we must admit that it is culture-bound in excluding taste and smell, for example, as ways of knowing (Howes 2006: 6).

Nevertheless, our educational experience with museum objects reinforces Gardner’s point that the intelligences and we would add the senses, are vitally interconnected. To take one example here at the outset of the museum visit, we supported diverse pupils’ involvement in handling an object – such as a gourd drinking vessel – employing bodily kinaesthetic, linguistic, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences since they were encouraged express their feelings and opinions all the while. To help connect the pupils with this object Amoafi asked the pupils ‘what do you like to drink when you wake up in the summer mornings when it is hot?’ This prompted comments about healthy drinks, juice and milk for everyday with cola and fanta at parties. Then as some pupils were thirsty we all partook of an imaginary cool drink – whatever we liked - from the gourd. Amoafi wanted to highlight both the universal feature and the local distinctiveness associated with human act of taking liquid into the body through handling one piece of material culture and engaging in dialogue. She noted human beings all over the earth and across the centuries require drink to sustain life, employing diverse materials and making different vessels to fulfill this need. Most importantly she took care throughout her sessions to use language appropriate to the pupils. She told them how some
Ghanaians like her like are fond of using gourds or calabash when drinking water since ‘a special coolness or peace’ can be derived from this method in hot weather, which other writers have noted (Guerts and Gershon 2006: 35).

Handling this object the pupils noted it was lighter than it looked and they imagined it getting lighter still as the imaginary drink was consumed. ‘It’s light, cool, cold, light, not heavy, lighter now’ they commented. They all seemed to appreciate balancing the gourd form in their hands and exploring the smooth surface texture. Two non-verbal pupils specially enjoyed smelling the gourd while touching and endlessly tapping it all over, small section by small section, without spilling a drop of the imaginary liquid! Temple Grandin, writing from the perspective of an adult autistic person, has observed how such tapping seems to aid understanding of the object boundaries and the relation to the body in space for some autistic people (Grandin 2005: 321). In the museum context bodily contact with the object seems to be able to help promote a feeling of security in the social space that is derived from perceiving the stability of the external world and the human relation to it, which allows the child some relaxation and hence is felt as a pleasurable emotion of ‘coolness and peace’.

Tactile handling activities such as this first gourd case were intended to bring objects in static displays to life in the eyes, ears, hands, noses, mouths, hearts and minds of the pupils. All the activities and objects I shall highlight next were chosen from previous experience by the team leaders to facilitate the making of sensual, emotional and intellectual connections between distant cultures on display and the children’s everyday lives. This was crucial. As team leaders we agreed human sense-making is embodied in
material culture rendered ‘touchless, speechless, and smell-less’, through the glass cases of the traditional anthropology museum, in a symbolic disciplining of the ‘other’ to the dominant western gaze of the educated, wealthy visitor (Classen and Howes 2006: 210-211). For Brent Knoll pupils to access the meanings of the objects, multisensory routes to knowledge construction, imaginative and affective engagement was vital.

David Perkins, one of Gardner’s Project Zero Harvard researchers observes how close observation of art can engender questioning or ‘thinking dispositions’, which ‘connect to social, personal and other dimensions of life with strong affective overtones’ (Perkins 1994: 3-4). At the Horniman Museum we also noted objects help to pose ‘good questions’ to the viewer and provide a powerful affective springboard for dialogue, drawing on intellect, emotion and imagination. It was important for children to employ creativity and imagination to mediate the external world of feelings, ideas and desires, which the object-centred talk generated. Handling objects offered a pertinent means of anchoring emotions, thought and motivated pupils to engage in talk over an extended period of time. We understand this sensual thinking activity as a ‘passionate enterprise’ stimulating strong feelings ‘concern and commitment, spirit and persistence’ over time (ibid.: 13).

Taking time to look, interact and discuss the objects in a spirit of mutual exploration with the team leader artists, museum-educators and schoolteachers, gradually raised the Brent Knoll pupils’ confidence, which enabled them to build-up expressive skills and communicate increasingly complex ideas. For example, looking at the headrest in the handling collection and trying it out for comfort through touch prompted the
engagement of pupils in discussing common experiences – the needs for sleep and
dream across cultures. Posing questions when handling the headrest: ‘do you sleep with
a headrest at home, how do you rest your head when you sleep?’, helped to connect the
pupils with the object and also highlighted the differences between squashy feather
pillows at home in London and firm wooden headrests in South Africa, which in turn
prompted pupils’ imaginations to explore the reasons for structural differences in
materials and technologies. Pupils remembered we often wake up on our pillows with
messy hair in the morning, while the headrest would protect a more elaborate hairstyle,
which prompted the deduction that the headrest would be cooler to sleep with on a hot
summer night when we often wake up sticking with sweat to our pillows.

The museum handling session importantly involved pupils listening to each other and to
the museum’s ideas on the displayed headrests: how some very old headrests were once
covered with gold, how they can support our necks while we sleep and help to protect
our fancy hairstyles, how we think only men owned headrests in old Zimbabwe and
perhaps used them as a status symbol, what different ideas people have about the
meaning of the symbols on the headrests and perhaps most importantly for this project,
how some old headrests were thought to ‘catch’ the dreams of the sleeping person.
These points inspired questions such as: if you had a headrest what would you like it to
be made from? should women have a headrest too? do you have any status symbols,
such as Nike trademark ticks on your trainers, for example? what do you think the
headrest symbols might mean? Again, schoolteachers noted how enjoyable it was for
the children to interrogate the museum object in conversation, by drawing connections
with daily life. The enjoyment of the museum objects was enhanced by being linked to
pleasurable activities outside the walls of the museum and school, for example reflecting on favourite TV programmes, comics, holidays, eating food and drinking while wearing trainers.

Following oral engagement, when these bodily kinaesthetic and talking activities had sufficiently relaxed the pupils, we asked them to look again closely at the Horniman headrests on display and write down on their worksheets what they thought about them and how they made them feel, with the help of a scribe if needed. They had mixed feelings: ‘hard and uncomfortable because they are made of wood... peaceful... happy... sleepy... confused and tired... horrible...’ After sharing their ideas the pupils went on to find and draw other objects in the exhibition, which featured shapes and patterns similar to those included on the Shona headrests. Finally, because we had spoken at the start of the session about the Shona headrests ‘catching dreams’, Amoafi ended the session by telling two short stories about dreams which aimed to engage the pupils in emotional dialogue – actively listening and making critical comments, rather than passively absorbing the words of the storyteller.

In one story, a dream spirit granted a poor man with a blind mother and wife who wanted a baby, one wish. Amoafi asked the pupils what they might wish for: wealth, sight for his mother or a baby for his wife? Different pupils responded with reasons for each of the three wishes: wealth would benefit the whole family, but it would not give sight to the blind nor could it buy a baby. We should not be selfish and wish for ourselves, but whose wish is more important in the story – the mother’s or the wife’s? One girl sadly recalled a blind grandpa crying, a boy mentioned his mum wanted a baby
and another pupil said she might cry now. Amoafi had the sensitivity and storytelling skills to acknowledge and ‘hold’ the sad emotions of the group without an overwhelming negativity pervading the space and without abandoning everyone to a distraught state. Eventually she told the pupils ‘the man wished his mother could see his wife rocking their baby in a golden cradle full of gold coins’, which was considered to be a most satisfactory solution.

African storytelling, in posing questions, provided a powerful means for the museum to engage in a dynamic dialogue with the Brent Knoll pupils since they were asked to actively contribute their own ideas and feelings. This two-way dialogical process and the embodied experiences with objects equipped the listeners with inspiring tools for making their own meanings out of the handling and exhibited objects by helping them to draw connections with their daily lives as we have seen. For our final activity at the museum, Amoafi and I asked the pupils to reflect on their own dreams, which are like wishes, and share them in conversation with the group. Our intention was for pupils to begin to employ their dream images in the imaginative retelling of their own stories. The pupils offered some personal dream fragments, which included: ‘computerised mini-scooters going into space; a cloud with an alien spaceship inside landing in the garden; toys; Kung Fu; ghosts eating jelly; a brother in hospital with water; watching a comet from earth; vampires and trees; animals; houses; racing cars having accidents and putting out fires.’ Brent Knoll teachers considered these important fragments of personal communication for the pupils, and rich notions to build upon and expand in storytelling and art work back at school.
Thinking of dreams away from the museum: school reflections

At school the following day the pupils developed their dream ideas through literacy work. The autistic child, who can be fearful of human touch, was seen to welcome haptic interaction with objects in the museum and so handling was once more encouraged. Pupils were presented with a range of African textiles from the museum handling collection, including hats with sparkly threads, softly woven kente silks and brightly printed cottons, which prompted much joyful recall of the museum visit. We were especially pleased to observe the two non-verbal pupils again finding pleasure in touch with the textiles that they rather than another initiated (Grandin 2005: 318). Initiating touch was pleasurable for the pupils in offering physical interaction and a sense of connection with the material world, which brought the world into a more sharply defined focus and vividness leading to ‘safer and happier’ feelings (Classen 2005: 76).

Then literacy work began with Amoafi retelling the dream story to further remind pupils of the museum. There is dynamism to the oral event that escapes notions of a single rigid meaning, which might always be imparted in a linear fashion laid out before the eyes for reading (Classen 1993: 107). The ideal story space is rather likened to a ‘forum’, where all participants have an active role in negotiating meanings (Golding 2007c). For Brent Knoll pupils offering ‘frame’ sentences – ‘Sometimes I dream about …’ and ‘But my best dream of all is …’ – for the pupils to complete, provided a helpful structure for organizing their feelings and ideas in greater detail. For example:

Sometimes I dream about: vampires taking over the world, making a rocket,
attacking a robot, but my best dream of all is getting a new bike.

Sometimes I dream about: dragons eating me, my brother is shooting in the night, about sleeping in my mum’s bed, but my best dream of all is when I get a hamster for my birthday.

The ‘safe’ space that the ‘Inspiration Africa!’ team had constructed at the museum with the handling objects on the ‘Magic Carpet’ was mirrored at school and extended. Wrapped in their chosen dream cloths and wearing wish hats, pupils seemed to experience an embodied feeling of ease that furthered the pedagogical task of possibly sharing a nightmare alongside a ‘best’ dream. In some sense the touch of the textiles permitted the children’s anxieties and fears to emerge orally and most importantly to be contained in the space. As in the museum providing a secure setting with objects was vital for the unfolding of narratives on frightening events such as ‘accidents and fires’; terrifying meetings with ‘ghosts, vampires and aliens’ in scary places like ‘hospitals and spaceships’ that were disturbing in the wider world but not crippling when brought to voice and written word or expressed visually in art.

Raising negative feelings in, and in association with, the museum, demands that team-leaders act therapeutically, helping to contain or ‘hold’ the emotion and minimizing its destructive effect. To a large extent it was Amoafi’s skill that permitted uncomfortable feelings to be explored and held in the safe framework of the imaginative story space, which was enhanced by the selection of handling artifacts. It may be objected here that it is rare to have such a skilled educator like Amoafi and that the museum educator is
not ‘a therapist or social worker’, but this ‘does not excuse’ her ‘for ignoring the suffering or disquiet’ of a student and furthermore the ‘capacity for empathy and solidarity, that very humanity is in itself therapeutic’ (Freire 1998: 128). We argue from our ‘Inspiration Africa!’ experience that giving voice to emotions, through reflexive dialogical exchange sparked by close encounters with objects made significant to children’s lives, is of therapeutic value that can be enhanced through active play with language and narrative story structure.

Sigmund Freud, the great father of psychoanalysis, notes that certain objects are endowed with special significance by human beings from their earliest years. In ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, Freud muses the special nature attached by a small boy, one and a half years old, to a wooden reel on a string in his game ‘fort … da’ [gone … here], where the child rolls the reel away expressively calling out ‘gone’ and reels it back again calling out ‘here’ with equal passion (Freud 1984: 269-338). Freud notes the child in imaginative play with an object and with language. In his view, the child is employing the reel and the language game as a substitute for the absent mother and it is with these uniquely human means that the child can take some sense of control over the uncertainties of life as a vulnerable infant who is subject to separation from the first love object, the mother.

It can be argued that Freud’s paper provides us with an analysis of the emotional power certain objects hold for human beings. If we accept that the reel can serve as an object in a language game permitting the small child to cope with difficult emotions, the feelings of loss, separation and the threat of abandonment, then perhaps this thesis may
cast light on the power of the museum object to inspire ‘resonance and wonder’ in the viewer, and the power of human action and connectedness through objects (Greenblatt 1991). For example, through touch pupils were able to modify objects in the world, causing musical instruments to emit sound or the textiles they wrapped around themselves to change shape in line with increasing feelings of bodily comfort (Tuan 2005: 75-78). The sound of seeds pod shakers, bells, xylophone and drums were relatively easily made with Amoafi’s expert direction and carried a tremendous tonal quality that was quite literally ‘felt’ in the body, which made the music experience akin to experiencing an African language intimately connected to emotion (Stoller 1989: 163). In other words, the museum, with its objects and its wealth of contextual material surrounding them, was seen to offer a prime site for a deeply engaging experience or ‘minds on’ activity, which is distinct from simple ‘hands on’ (Hein 1998: 31).

These ideas can be further illuminated, and demonstrate elements of fun learning or ‘edutainment’ with reference to artwork. The successful gaining of embodied knowledge through multisensory work with objects prompted similar approaches to the ‘Dream Cushion’ artwork, which highlighted the embodied mind as a vehicle for creative effort. The exceptional quality of Brent Knoll’s art, which expresses complex ideas, visually arose out of the sensory work of communication with storytelling, for example, prompting listening attentively and speaking with respect – primary work of language and social engagement that the pupils had found so difficult.

Discussion and art activities were designed to bring the pupils together, in mutually supportive tasks. To make their dream cushion art work, pupils worked in pairs, one
lying on a large piece of paper imagining themselves asleep on their pillow at home, whilst another child carefully drew around them to produce a silhouette of the sleeping child with space above to add dream shapes. The subsequent dream shapes activity employed images from the museum visit taken from observations of patterns sketched on worksheets and personal dreams. These were later screen-printed by the pupils onto individual dream cushions for the storytelling corner. In the process, pupils considered the emotional effect of different cold and warm colours, employing warm or cold colour blends. They were also able to make their blends visually effective, using light colours at the bottom growing darker at the top, just like a night sky.

While considering the emotions and colour, pale blue was widely seen as a cold unfriendly and unfeeling colour, which reinforces Classen, who also notes blue being associated with depression in the 16th century and indecency in the 19th (Classen 1993: 61-3). No pupil mentioned blue in the sense of obscene but blue was regarded as a sad colour by many pupils and linked to the expressions of feeling blue, although the brighter blues reminded one pupil of the Caribbean Sea and were associated with warm waters. Pupils were reminded of the warm welcome at the museum when using and talking about the warm and hot red and yellow tints and hues, but they did not associate hot figuratively to mean excited, nor with scent to mean strong, or to describe lively music (Classen 1993: 67). The hot colours were associated with the sun, warm sunny days and lovely long warm baths, with sweet smelling soft textured bath foams by some pupils. This inspired some more touch activity and two bowls one with warm and one with cool water was provided for children to dip and wash their hands in. Here the tactile sense was activated by contrast, alternations of heat and cool, and this embodied
experience was intimately bound to sunnier mood and emotion, by recalling the thermal delights of shade and coolness in the heat of the sun (Tuan 2005: 77-8).

Finally, before drawing some conclusions from this case study, it is worth emphasizing once again the pleasure derived from haptics, the pleasurable sense of touch during the making of their art work, which was achieved when hand painting directly onto squares of fabric for the back of the cushions, squeegeeing off the excess ink and then mono-printing designs on top. Grandin notes that while the sensual pleasure in touch may be compromised in autistic children whose skin can be excessively sensitive it can also be highly valued as providing reliable information about the external world and permit autistic individuals a degree of learning and understanding of the environment through their fingers (Grandin 2005: 320). Bearing in mind this point, sand was added to some of the smooth thick printing inks and the feeling of these contrasting textures enhanced the pupil’s bodily pleasure just as the experience of contrasting temperatures had earlier.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored a vital unity between reason and the senses. I began from a personal position in the twentieth century, offering a disclosure of one traumatically emotional experience of racism during my youth together with the healing optimistic ‘dream’ speech of an anti-racist future, which served as a productive theme for a museum/school project entitled ‘Inspiration Africa!’ at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The chapter outlined how notions of the dream and the wish gave rise to a whole cluster of individual emotions such as happiness and fear for two classes of pupils on the autistic spectrum who were facilitated in sharing feelings, which they
found difficult but manageable at a ‘frontier’ fieldsite between the Horniman Museum and their school Brent Knoll.

At the museum/school frontier the pupils focused on material culture: one key object, a Shona headrest on display, that was said to prompt dreams, and a handling collection of Sub-Saharan objects including textiles, musical instruments, gourd vessels, headrests and stools. In active learning sessions including storytelling, music and art making attention was drawn to the museum objects as well as to the wider intangible oral traditions from which they emerge, which prompted dynamic emotional and intellectual connections between and within the displayed cultures and the contemporary lives of the pupils. Most importantly, activities did not set up binary oppositions between one sort of visual ‘Western’ and one sort of aural ‘African’ culture but attempted to work with a sensory mingling that Classen observes as the natural state of the baby the world over, who reaches out and looks to the light (Classen 1993: 56)

While all the activities were largely enjoyed, it was the pleasure derived from the sensual embodied experience of handling objects that was ‘self-affirming and self-transcending’, which was especially important for the autistic pupils for whom handling seemed to provide a variety of sensory keys to unlock their virtual imprisonment in private worlds (Classen 1993: 69). It was in giving individual expression within the school group through touch, smell, taste, voice, art and music, to the ‘nightmare touch’ of ‘unutterable monsters and abortions’ of dreams (de Quincey 2005: 342) that fears preventing communication seemed to be eased. Touch proved a key sense to gain embodied knowledge, just as handling offered an essential means of acquiring
knowledge for the wealthy visitor to the Ashmolean Museum as long ago as 1702 (Classen and Howes 2006: 201). For example, pupils were able to feel the lightness of objects such as the big gourd water pots, which appeared so heavy to the eyes alone, and this startling correction to the illusion of the single sense of sight, provoked wonder and the desire to repeat the pleasurable experience.

Perhaps touch was a joyful experience because of its immediacy and direct relation to the body, the feel of silky textiles next to skin for instance, produced intense emotional reactions and startling sensations in the mind that pupils were able to express through words, images or gestures. Touching objects seemed to provide a straightforward physical connection with the makers and users from past times and distant places, somehow prompting a feeling of what the other may have felt through the material reality of things. For example through embodied engagement with unfamiliar museum objects and discussing their tactile qualities in comparison with familiar objects from home, such as a Shona headrest and a feather pillow, pupils came closer to indigenous feelings and meanings and closer to communicating their own trapped feelings and meanings, which was seen to be immensely satisfying and agreeable. Working with a professional artist Tony Minion and the storyteller/musician Amoafi Kwappong, who shared the African heritage of the museum objects, proved an added impetus to inspire pupil’s creativity and greatly motivated communication in general, which was difficult for the pupils. Collaboration not only raised the quality of the pupils’ own art, the fantastic dream cushions and their musical skills and understanding, but also developed their multiple intelligences, which reinforces recent research (Perkins 1994; Gilborn 1995).
Overall, intercultural understanding was progressed by illuminating commonalities across cultural differences, and cross-cultural empathies were facilitated through the multisensory features of projects that enabled pupils to make ‘sense’ of their shared world (Classen 1993). This took time and the development of ‘safe’ social spaces in the museum and the school, such as the welcoming museum space with the ‘magic storytelling carpet’, which proved crucial to relaxing pupils. In short, in taking time to discuss ideas with the teachers throughout the project work; pedagogically slowing down and ‘listening’ to the pupils expressing their dreams, wishes, doubts and fears; constructing as many sensual bridges as possible between the world of the autistic pupil and the world of the object, arming them with information, imagination and empathy – humanity was seen to communicate with humanity (Freire 1998; Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 132).


2 King’s speech locates the importance of his dream of racial equality within the wider American dream: ‘its creed’, of ‘self-evident truths’ and values based on ‘inalienable’ Human Rights – first set out in the USA on July 4th 1776 in the Declaration of Independence (http://www.usconstitution.net/declar.html accessed at 15 May 2008). Nonetheless in the eighteenth century these Human Rights excluded certain humans – explicitly ‘the merciless Indian Savages’, and tacitly the enslaved African American people, whose humanity, liberty and equality was not recognized until the Emancipation Proclamation (1862, 1863) of the nineteenth century, which King cites. The Emancipation Proclamation of 22nd September 1862 declared the emancipation of the enslaved, and the executive order of 1st January 1863 named the actual states to which
Emancipation referred. Then on 18th December 1865, the thirteenth Amendment ratified the prohibition of slavery in the Constitution (http://www.usconstitution.net/eman.html; http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html#Am13; accessed 8 August 2008).


4 I consider these issues further in Golding 2009.


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