
**REFORMING THE EDUCATIONAL APPROACH OF MUSEUM EDUCATION:
*LESSONS LEARNT FROM PARTICIPATION IN THE SMOOTH PROJECT***

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses how the participation in the SMOOTH project transformed both the perspective and practice of the educational approach of museum education in the MOMus-Museum of Modern Art-Costakis collection in 2022-2023 programs. The project inspired changes across multiple levels and aspects of museum education, including the adoption of a more participant-centered approach. For the first time, the

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educational team invited preschoolers as experts to test and adapt their new program. The model of one museum educator addressing one group changed to a team of museum facilitators mingling with the group in order to disempower the role of museum educators as leaders. The team used a black room which functioned as a welcoming and waiting area, but also as a sharing and caring space only for group visits. The pedagogical tools, such as pedagogical documentation, active listening and analysis of artworks produced during the activities in any program, helped to enrich them and encouraged both facilitators and participants to better understand their experiences. Additionally, the team prioritizes quality over quantity by giving as much time as possible to each group, thus allowing visitors to spend more time in the museum. These changes have led to a more effective and participant-centered approach to museum education at MOMus Modern-Museum of Modern Art. By drawing on the lessons learnt from the SMOOTH project, the museum education team has developed a more engaging and enriching educational practice that empowers participants and encourages them to become active learners.

Keywords: MoMus Museum, Art-Costakis collection, reforming museum education, participant-centered approach, pedagogical documentation, active listening, active learners

Reforming the Educational Approach of Museum Education: Lessons Learnt from Participation in the SMOOTH Project

MOMus-Museum of Modern Art, hosts the largest collection of Russian avant garde art outside Russia, the Costakis collection. The museum's educational department, consisting of three museum educators, (Evi Papavergou, Katerina Paraskeva, Maria Kechagioglou), along with a guest researcher (Elina Moraitopoulou) and a musician (Evi Makatounaki), formed a team which designed and applied a museum educational program, for the SMOOTH project which is “introducing the emergent paradigm of the ‘commons’ as an alternative value and action system in education for children and young people”¹. The educational program under the title ‘In and out of sync’: creative dialogues between Russian Avant-garde art and young people’s music-based experimentations” took place during ten, three-hour-long Friday meetings over the course of three months, in almost all the museum spaces. Museum educators invited the participating students/commoners from the 1st Vocational high school of Stavroupoli, which is located in the same area as the museum.

The museum and school neighborhood is part of western Thessaloniki, a developing city area. Students witnessed some violent events inside the school environment, organized by a group of far-right students and possibly extracurricular individuals, supporters of an illegal, neo Nazi political group. Violent attacks between the far-right groups and antifascist, libertarian university students, protesting outside the school against the actions of the first, took place. Many students experienced emotional and physical violence as well. These events took place after our museum/school collaboration was decided and some days before our first meeting with the students. Inevitably this happening strengthened our research goal and especially the part concerning commons and their values.

While contemplating our research goals, the following question emerged: How could we initiate a creative dialogue between young people, modern art, and music-based experimentations, building on the values of the educational commons such as collaboration, equal participation, care, autonomy, responsibility, sharing and empathy? To put it differently, we should have rather also considered how we unlearn a role, how we challenge authority, how we confute mastery, and how we give recognition to the rights of the child. The general idea was to give the students the opportunity to decide on their own how to spend their time during the meetings and ideally to create an artwork. Our teams’ decision making, methodology, our mindset overall, was determined by our previous SMOOTH project and this will be analyzed in the following sections.

During the academic year 2022-2023, our team came up with several school programs, adult and youth seminars and workshops, artistic interventions etc. Physical and conceptual space of these actions, kick off point and inspiration tank was the exhibition 'Organic Art, the avant-garde in Petrograd ', hosted in the museum space for eleven months. Our aim was

to create a series of different environments in which the art is in one sense the backdrop and can be discovered by the way it is experienced, rather than as a form of pure intellectual focus (Papastergiadis 2020).

Hence aiming for active and empowered museum visitors, museum educators gave students the responsibility of deciding the everyday structure visit, the actions they wished to engage with, as well as the possibility or not to create an artwork individually or collectively.

Little Tree calibrating our programs- museum educators stepping back

Contemplating our aspirations and the lived experience of the SMOOTH CS, we decided to test our future programs by inviting students from Mikro Dendro (Little Tree), a pre-school, libertarian school, asking them to calibrate our program activities. The whole community of Mikro Dendro, children, parents and educators were invited to the museum, to use their own experiences and expertise as a guide and starting point, in order to shape the museum program, which was under construction, for the rest of the schools to follow, during the upcoming academic year. During this visit we understood the necessity of hosting some of the community's everyday rituals in our processes, giving time and space to function as a community, in this case, as a team of children and adults. The team needed to use some time before entering the museum to perform their daily assembly and to prepare for the visit. Also, during the program both school and museum educators participated equally, either as facilitators or initiators of activities. Similarly, one other observation, which was critical to the way we performed our programs for the rest of the school groups, was the allowance given to all the children one by one to use an interactive museum exhibit (Terpsiton: an electronic musical instrument which produces sound as you move your body standing on a platform) at the end of the program. The process of creating a time zone in which each member of the team will be able to use the exhibit as they wish, if they wished, created a physical and conceptual space where we give attendance to anyone who is willing to perform in front of the team. These insights were later incorporated to the future sessions, to the extent of each school group's possibilities. Either way, inviting a group to assess

and test a museums' ideas and programs was a critical experience for the institution and museum professionals.

In the early stages of the SMOOTH project, museum educators along with the researcher and the musician roughly drew a plan on the actions that would take place during the school visits. Our specialized mentors, associate professors in the University of Thessaly, Niki Nikonanou and Panagiotis Kanellopoulos encouraged an attempt to predict, prepare and envision a timeline but pointed out to avoid designing a solid plan, regarding the interventions and activities. The suggestion was to avoid structure, steps or goals concerning the meetings. That, for the museum educators' team, was quite confusing and new. Envisioning but not so much, preparing without a plan, predicting scenarios without a map, led to a dead end most of the time.

However, since the best way to empower young people is stepping back and allowing them to freely express themselves and to understand their ability to self-regulate and be creative, our goal was to give the opportunity to the participants to be active co-creators. Thus, we were patient, reminding ourselves to take a step back, give space and trust the procedure of a joined participatory project where everyone would come and get involved with the concept, the design, the goals and possibly a final product of creative processes, based on collective desires and aspirations, expressed through democratic practices.

As stated earlier, starting the collaboration in the SMOOTH CS the team consisted of five persons, which all had an equal role and presence. During our previous years of being museum educators and implementing different educational programs for various groups, our casual modus operandi was: one museum educator per group. The SMOOTH experience taught us that having two or three museum educators per group, would eliminate the leading power of the adult educator, enhancing a casual atmosphere between adults and youth. Consequently, instead of acting as authority figures, our role in the program would be identified as facilitators.

Sharing authority

The choreography that we follow in the museum, our body posture and movements, is a strong indicator of the roles we undertake, the way we feel and the dynamics among the group members. It is quite common that students form a group standing across the person owning the power. It is the way most Greek classrooms are also designed. Even though this was repeated during our initial SMOOTH meetings, we gradually initiated a circular sitting, us being also cited among students, until it was

no longer useful, as we wanted to freely move around, to create, to discuss in smaller groups, etc. This insightful observation drew our attention to the way we move, avoiding distinctive spots, hence canceling the notion of the savant museologist and the passive visitor who expects ready-made knowledge.

Museum experts are extremely concerned about inclusive practices, interaction and participation over the past few years. Building audiences, educating visitors and launching engaging processes, do not happen the moment that the museum decides to shift the usual procedures or to add some participatory programs to their scheduling.

Co-creation or co-curation is thus often unmasked as a shallow political gesture. What we find are too often tokenistic consultations without authentic decision-making power, operating through relationships that disempower and control people. (Mörsch, Sachs & Sieber 2016: 257)

The bet here concerns people working in the museums, educators, directors, curators and the question should be whether or not we are able to unlearn and review our work ethics, stance and habits. Sometimes to unlearn means to trust something new. Trusting participatory procedures like giving the visitors the opportunity to self-regulate and work on their team balance through games, assemblies, discussions or even recess means that you have to be patient and flexible. Having designed a specific activity doesn't mean you have to keep repeating it if it is not engaging. Initiatives would not be promoted only by museum professionals. In the SMOOTH meetings, specifically at the beginning of each meeting, students would act as if they were in recess; they were speaking loud, were on their phones, laughing or playing without paying attention to what we had to say or do. This made us feel uncomfortable because we didn't want to play the role of the teacher who would restore order. It was a struggle for us not to bring the attention to some group focus, or to suggest silence, or to use artworks as a hook. This chaos was a crisis for the team.

But, we were patient and supportive to each other. Eventually one of the students said that *she was bored and that she would like to see the artworks, because she thinks that this is a museum so there must be artworks*. That was the first step of many to follow and an opportunity to talk about the way we can actually be active and creative in the museum. Also this was an initiative coming from the students and not from the adults. This experience helped us be less afraid of chaotic moments in our everyday work practices and school visits. We tried to incorporate this experience later in other programs. Regulating our need for control unlocks the process of participation and boosts inclusivity.

Time to wander around and the idea of a viewing guide

Allowing more fuss and time, always depends on the total amount of time available with each group.

If education is about technicians transmitting information and skills and delivering predetermined outcomes against predefined norms, then it needs little time for children or educators to think or work. But if it is a democratic process of building knowledge through complex and creative relationships and processes, then education requires commensurate time (Vecchi, 2010, Organization and ways of working section).

Even though broader programs, timewise, tend to be tiring, incorporating pockets of free time during the visit means more time to process, breath, absorb and observe. Meetings during the SMOOTH case study lasted thirty hours in total, while school visits usually last for one and a half hours.

After SMOOTH we expanded this time to two hours for secondary students and since the guided tour was rejected by the SMOOTH participants, who chose to freely wander around the exhibition spaces and to do some drawing and copying exercises, we decided to remove it from the rest of our programs. We added a viewing guide instead, a tool to be used freely and individually or collectively, suggesting creative questions to think about when meeting with a painting. Some examples of the questions on the guide are: ‘if this was a smell what would it be?’, ‘can you locate three objects in the painting that manifest traveling?’, or ‘what is the first thing that comes to your mind when looking at this image?’. After the given time to experiment with this viewing guide, groups meet again and discuss their experience, possible answers and form new questions. Our goal is to create the space to share insights regarding the exhibition and the paintings, either deriving from the participants or the museum educators and create further conceptual and visual connections with our own life experiences or other artworks. Due to the fact that most of the answers are subjective and imaginative, most of the participants are comfortable to talk. This talk usually provokes some additional nuanced observations about the artworks, the art movements and the socio-political conditions during which these works were made. The success of this intervention encouraged us to use this alternative to the classic guided tour process, during guided tours with adult participants as well.

Pedagogical documentation & magnetic boards

Literature on pedagogical documentation as an educational tool from Reggio Emilia schools, mostly refers to preschool students and teachers. Notwithstanding, we have two examples of attempting to use this tool ‘of great value for planning, researching,

evaluating, professional development and supporting democratic participation’ (Vecchi, 2010, Organization and ways of working section) for the highschool students from the SMOOTH project. Almost in the middle of our project meetings, we observed an ambivalent feeling regarding the continuity of our activities and the progress of the project. In order to address that issue and to boost our appetite for some more creative processes and games we created a short video with sound, depicting some moments of our meetings so far. The photographs we used were taken by various members of the team. At the end of the video we posed the question: so what is next?

According to Rinaldi: ‘pedagogical documentation is a process for making (...) work visible and subject to interpretation, dialogue, confrontation and understating’ (Rinaldi, 2021, The power of pedagogical documentation section) and adds that ‘in these fragments (images, words, signs and drawings) there is the past which took place, but there is also the future (or rather what else can happen if...)’ (Rinaldi, 2021, Documentation section). The reaction to the video, for the students, was mostly surprise as to how many things we have already accomplished. The relationships between the members of the group were commented on and we also enjoyed collectively watching these recent memories. The video really boosted our energy and fired up new discussions and ideas about the work we would like to do in the following meetings.

Another example of pedagogical documentation that influenced our work practices under a new perspective was that of retelling and revisiting what has happened (Fleet, Patterson & Robertson 2017). Students had already worked on some artworks, shaping in rough lines some studies or sketches, depicting the concept of war and peace either symbolically, literally or abstractly. Their art processes included drawings, paintings, sculpture, knitting, block printing, while various were not only the medium but the size as well. Also the work was mostly unfinished and at different stages of completion. All these differentiations were starting to block the collective vision about the final artwork, which was about to be exhibited in the museum space, as an equally worthy artwork, among the collection pieces. In order to exceed this difficulty we decided to offer to the group a new perspective, with the least possible intervention. We printed out all the artworks, sketches, exercises in good quality paper and the same size, and exhibited the result on the floor for the group to observe, reflect, discuss and enjoy.

Students observed for the first time the work developed by their peers, came up with ideas of connection and the perspective of bigger scale prints of their sketches revealed new possibilities of expanding their work and ideas. In a way, participants saw the bigger image and learned from each other. One student said: *‘we got to know our classmates a little bit better, how they like to draw etc. [...] Even though we are*

all classmates [...], we had never previously dedicated ourselves as much in talking, communicating with each other, also due to the fact that we were wearing [face] masks and we were not allowed to talk in the classroom, to see each other's ideas, in how they draw etc'. (focus group 1, 220506).

Consequently, during the programs that followed we dedicated as much time as possible at the end of each session to observe, reflect and discuss the creative result of the group visit. During that time we remain silent, letting the students regulate their discussion and comment on their work and the work of their peers. Once the conversation keeps rolling, additional questions and comments are expressed. We were delighted to discover that the more time we give, the most explosive their storytelling will become. When children talk about their artistic choices, or analyze the creations made by their peers, they become empowered, they reinvent the way they use language and creativity is nourished.

Similarly, in a regular school visit, teenage students requested that they would like to see other artworks created during this same program made by others. As a result, being faithful to active listening, we created two large magnetic walls where we invited all the students to exhibit their art, informing all of the visiting schools about this exhibition space. About 1000 students displayed their artworks, which were musical transcriptions for everyone to enjoy, becoming part of a work in progress.

Black room & the importance of space

Finally, we would like to comment on the crucial role of the space needed in such educational interventions. In our case, the motherboard space was a black room. Simultaneously we used almost any other available museum space, like the backyard, our offices and all of the exhibition spaces. The black room was allowed to us, for the project, by the museum management. Since day one, we suggested that students could bring personal objects to decorate the space, leave their mark, familiarize with the museum and offer through these objects an ice breaker for the desired discussion about interests, inspiration, aesthetics and our own personal experiences. This suggested freedom of personal intervention and decoration was not easily perceived by the students, who were reluctant to bring something. However, after some meetings the black room was transformed, taking different forms and uses like gathering, recessing, working or exhibiting space.

By the end of the SMOOTH project we requested to maintain this space for school groups use, as a waiting room. We placed large bean bag chairs, colorful lights, books, colors and papers and a board for free use. Even though we invited students and

teachers to use the space freely, we realized that the teachers would not allow students to move freely, or to use the wifi. The moment we left the room, it was transformed to a silent classroom due to teachers' anxiety of behaving. This experiment failed and this year we will no longer use this transitional space which could, under other circumstances, be a relaxing, getting to familiarize with the institution, free space. Yet adjusting to the needs of participants is an indicator of the participatory museum.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the participation in the SMOOTH project has led to a comprehensive transformation in the educational approach at MOMus-Museum of Modern Art. This shift emphasizes a participant-centered methodology that involves collaboration with preschoolers and the effective use of pedagogical tools, such as documentation and active listening. It highlights the vital importance of unlearning traditional roles and fostering flexibility, even during chaotic moments, to encourage creativity and inclusivity. Extending time for reflection empowers participants to engage more deeply with their experiences. Moreover, providing a space for personal expression within the museum establishes a sense of ownership and personal connection. Ultimately, these transformative changes signify a resolute commitment to empowering participants to become active learners in the museum context, ensuring a more enriching and engaging educational experience for all involved.

For our team, quality will always be a priority over quantity. Nevertheless, we are mostly concerned about the fact that the existence of a museum nowadays, depends mostly on numbers of visitors and income. Our wishful thinking is that quality will outstand quantity when it comes to children and teenagers who attempt to build a relationship with the museum and arts.

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¹ (<https://smooth-ecs.eu/about/>).