

# Art and Empathy at the Ian Potter Museum of Art

DR HEATHER GAUNT, IAN POTTER MUSEUM OF ART

Eighteen months ago Dr Heather Gaunt looked at new ways to make use of the collection at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. She tells INSITE about the Potter's Academic Programs Unit and their innovative forays into working within academic programs to build students' interpersonal skills.

## Can you tell us about this Outreach Program?

The Academic Programs Unit at the Potter engages with students from all over Melbourne University, across as many disciplines as we can reach. One of my major engagements within the Unit is working with students in the Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) areas. In mid-2012 I was approached by a palliative care specialist, Dr Natasha Michael, who was interested in bringing her students into the art museum to learn about visual observation and empathy. Over the next few months this pilot program built into a fully fledged seminar program with Special Needs Dentistry students, and other groups within MDHS. I created the seminars based on programs already running at Yale and Harvard Universities that would assist them to cultivate empathy and engagement skills in their students. These students really need to know how to look at information in a detailed way. Studies have demonstrated the advantages of programs like ours in improving visual observation skills with real world outcomes and benefits.

## Were the students intimidated by the Gallery environment?

Some students were defensive initially in the face of this intrusion into their study time and questioned its value. Mostly, though, the evaluations we get from the participants reflect their pleasure at the opportunity to reconnect with the humanities. The sessions happen with



small groups where conversations are easier and students can learn from each other.

## What are you asking the students to do when they look at a work of art?

I always co-teach the MDHS sessions with their clinician or academic specialist. Having a visual arts communicator and a clinician working together in a two-hour session really adds value to what the students are learning and validates the program for them. We talk with them about learned ways of thinking and how they might differ between disciplines. We deliberate a lot about thinking processes and we discuss how perceptions might have an impact in a diagnostic scenario.

I start the session by asking them to discuss objective and subjective interpretations of an artwork and the clinician will assist with observations about how these might apply in a clinical situation. The impact of cultural differences, and how these influence interpretation of data are discussed, for example. An examination of William Strutt's iconic painting about bushranging on St Kilda Road, Melbourne, might prompt discussion about how it can be difficult for students not brought up in Australian culture to interpret the local significance and context of the image. In a clinical situation these students will benefit from thinking about the relevance of their own views and experiences and how that may affect their interactions with patients. In the context of Biomedical Research students, being

Below: Dr Heather Gaunt speaking to Special Needs Dentistry students at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Photo by Joe Vittorio Photography, courtesy of the Ian Potter Museum of Art.

more visually aware can help them to be alert to something that is not in its right place, ambiguous data, or manipulation of medical visual evidence.

## What future directions are you looking at for the program?

The program has expanded into areas where there are parallel skills sets about reasoning, logical thinking and using visual prompts, as well as the ability to be empathic. I have worked with the Melbourne University Legal Services team to deliver professional development sessions, for example, and I am also working with an academic in Veterinary Sciences to deliver the program there, to enrich skills in radiographic interpretation. These types of developments reflect long term uses for the collection that have great potential. I am very interested in any project that makes the museum environment useful to a range of audiences.

In another related area, I have been working with a small team of students from Computer Science and Publishing and Communications to develop a mobile app for the Potter based around the idea of a 'personal response tour', where the individual's personal response to artworks is central to the museum visit. This came out of my interest in Ray Williams' Personal Response Tour that was used for medical students at Harvard University.<sup>1</sup> Our app was launched this month and has eleven key 'concepts' including love, hate, perplexity and hope, that prompt visitors' exploration of the museum. When you stand in front of an artwork you can submit a response under one of the concepts and then, importantly, see what other visitors thought and felt about that same concept, related to other pictures throughout the museum, at different times. It is about creating opportunities for people to engage on a personal level with the artworks, and share their experiences through the technology.

*Dr Heather Gaunt is Curator of Academic Programs (Research) at The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne:*

<http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au>

<sup>1</sup> See R. Williams, 'Honoring the personal response: A Strategy for Serving the Public Hunger for Connection', *Journal of Museum Education*, Volume 35, Number 1, Spring 2010, p.93.