

Raising Docent Confidence in Engaging Students on School Tours

Teri Evans-Palmer, PhD

Abstract Is a capability to engage students as fundamental to effective museum education as a working knowledge of the collections? What strategies can raise the level of engagement with students and sustain student engagement with works of art? What are the challenges that older students on school tours present to docents? This article highlights discussions with docents during and after a professional development session. It identifies specific student engagement behaviors that challenge museum educators' self-efficacy and offers insight on developing new engagement skills. A university art educator collaborated with the director of education at the McNay Art Museum for this investigation.

Introduction: Student Disengagement Challenges Docent Self-Efficacy

Gloria, a docent at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, was diligently preparing for her next school tour. She selected a few works of art from the new Warhol exhibition to be the focus of her talk. Gloria felt confident in her ability to present a rich description of the artists and background for the works, but felt shaky about keeping students of high school groups captivated for the length of the tour. Older students were frequently inattentive, and Gloria had seen a range of behaviors signaling disinterest, from bored looks to wandering away. Why was it difficult to keep some students engaged? Was it her discussion style? Were middle and high school students just not as attentive as they used to be? What could she do to keep them interested?

In any case, she shrugged off her uncertainty and moved toward the museum entrance to meet the group.

Inattentive behavior is not hard to miss. “If they try to wander away from the group, stare everywhere except where I want them to look, try to sit down whenever possible — these are the most obvious signs,” noted one discerning docent. Another offered that she knows she is not securing student interest when students are “not attending, looking away, wiggling or moving, and talking about other topics.” Another keenly explained, “I gauge whether students are not engaged by their interaction (or lack of) with the conversations and questioning that happens in a gallery and in front of specific works of art. Also, by the vacant look in students’ eyes when I’m talking and by their general bored demeanor (this usually happens with the older students).”

Docents at the McNay strive for skill at evoking visitors’ studied observation and understanding during their talks. They wish to be perceived as relevant, engaging museum educators who stage such compelling museum experiences, students and teachers want to return. Teaching students in informal contexts such as museums present certain challenges. “My challenge is whether or not I am using language they can relate to and understand,” one docent acknowledged. Another said that she did not want to “just fill the students with information but to involve each student as an intelligent being with ideas and observations of value.” She added, “I want them to leave the museum feeling verified *plus* have a good time on the tour.” A novice docent, a retired public school teacher, offered that managing students was not a concern but questioning strategies that would encourage perception and speculation beyond casual observation certainly was.

Kate Carey, the Director of Education at the McNay Art Museum, responded to docents’ uneasiness with student disengagement with a plan of action: develop training that would provide the knowledge and tools to enhance volunteer museum educators’ effectiveness with student groups. She invited me to facilitate a professional development session during the McNay’s annual docent continuing education week. My session would provide foundational information about child and youth development as a well as a requisite set of student engagement strategies.

While preparing for the training session, I learned that docents were eager to learn more about securing the attention of distracted students while leading school groups. Why was this an issue? One reason is that students were clearly not looking or listening. The structure in schools that steers student behavior (the requirement to sit in a chair in a room in a school building) is

absent when students move from classrooms to art museum galleries. Youth are likely to respond differently to educators who teach in the informal structure of a museum. Distractions and disengagement are commonplace. Additionally, a small percentage of docents lack the educational experience that builds teaching confidence. One docent asserted, "I have never taught and consequently feel inadequate as a leader of learning."

The Problem: Challenged Voices

As a K-12 art educator taking students to the McNay in the past, I observed how skillful docents are at guiding student observations to construct meanings. My students would excitedly cluster around works of art with an enthusiastic docent and stand breathless as their investigation revealed unfolding discoveries. Now, a university professor and student teacher supervisor, I am in and out of schools and museums each semester and can testify that fragmented student attention distractions in both classes and tour groups is on the rise.

Distracting behavior can be a miry impediment that forecloses listening and learning. When I asked what specific student behaviors threatened the attention of students most frequently, my docent cohorts were quick to construct a list. They shared examples that included: students staring blankly into space away from the artwork, texting on cell phones, carrying on side chats with friends, and wandering away. All of the behaviors worked to sever the fragile thread of engagement for the group, engagement with the works of art, and engagement with the docent as teacher.

As docents are challenged with disengaged student behaviors, their confidence in their ability to hold student attention wanes. Even the most esteemed teacher or museum educator can feel disappointed after entanglement with youth indifference and distractions. The perception of an ability to perform a specific task is quite potent and influences what an individual will do in future performances. Social learning research argues that the *perceptions and beliefs* that we hold about our abilities to perform a task are far more powerful than our *ability to actually perform* the task.¹ Not to be confused with self-esteem or self-worth, our beliefs of *self-efficacy* are what we believe about our ability to perform. These beliefs determine what we will do with the knowledge and skills we possess and even predict how we will perform in a new task.²

Educators with high self-efficacy are divergent thinkers, are able to connect socially with others, and are innovative, flexible, and resilient. They possess heightened emotional, cognitive, and affective capabilities and often sport a

high sense of humor that they use to motivate their students.³ When educators possess high self-efficacy beliefs, they feel capable of moving forward with effective problem-solving strategies to gain misplaced student attention.⁴ They show optimism in adversity and work hard to seek solutions. Their teaching methods engage and motivate students, clarify content, include memorable anecdotes, and can be quickly adapted to meet individual needs.

Research proposes that confidence in the ability to teach well comes from four sources. These sources serve to stimulate and raise the self-efficacy of learners and include: (a) enactive mastery experiences, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal persuasion, and (d) physiological, affective states. Raised docent self-efficacy was accomplished in my training session with the help of these sources.⁵

Research Strategy: Common Goals

Historically, docents at the McNay attend four days of comprehensive continuing education sessions in the spring and fall every year. They also attend monthly training sessions on exhibitions and special topics. The sessions are wide in scope and cover a variety of new knowledge and skills, specifically inquiry-based questioning strategies such as Visual Thinking Strategy. Teachers have participated as guests on informational panels in docent sessions as well. However, strategies for the purpose of raising docent self-confidence with student tours had not been presented. My goal for the docent professional development session, *Working with Disengaged Students in Group Tours*, was to build docent confidence in their ability to capture and sustain their engagement with older students on future school tours. This session was essential to minimize the self-doubt that tends to undermine docents' potential to teach effectively. I employed the following steps and methods to reach this goal: (a) First, explore the stories of docents and identify the situations in which perceptions of engagement self-efficacy is lowered; (b) increase docent knowledge of youth development and present specific engagement strategies that raise docents' perceptions of their engagement capabilities in a training session; and (c) measure the effectiveness of the training session with a post-session survey.

Method: Professional Development Session for Docents

Before the session began, Kate, the McNay Museum Education Director, was able to obtain a list of specific tour scenarios from docents that captured snapshots of disengaged older students. The scenarios sparked discussions and

directed my selection of the concrete tools that docents needed to encourage their confidence. I selected these from a “tool box” of engagement strategies that I had developed for art teachers. My past sessions with art educators that had proven to raise instructional and engagement self-efficacy guided the scope and direction of the session with docents.

Tools of Engagement that Meet Needs

As the session facilitator, I approached my cohort of tentative docents with a sort of “locker room pep talk” and began our discussion focused on the collective needs of both museum educators and student audiences. I identified the common need denominators of student learners at progressing stages of development and clarified that student disengagement moves into place when their needs are not met. Disengaged behaviors that reach across an engagement spectrum are represented in Figure 1.

My assumption was that when docents are responsive to the needs of youth, they would be able to conduct instructional conversations that produce a harvest of student participation and interest.⁶ Need responsiveness, together with engagement tools that support environments for active engagement, was in place to meet the goals of this study. The content of the session, *Working with Disengaged Students in Group Tours*, initiated strategies of engagement for docents and are presented in the following narratives.

Students Need to Feel Important

Nametags are a tool that not only helps students feel important, but also helps to smooth the way for docent rapport. In McNay tour confirmation packets, it is suggested that students arrive wearing nametags. Nametags are effective with

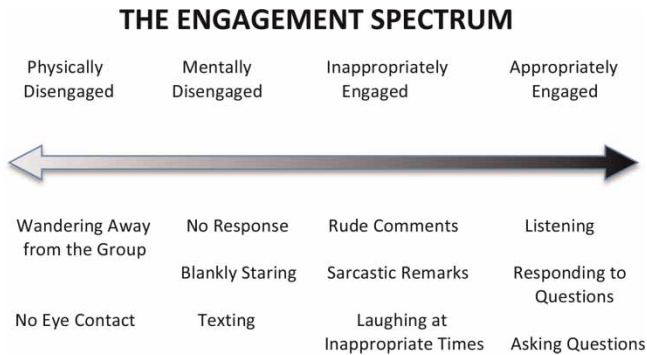


Figure 1 Student Engagement Spectrum.

younger students because they are more likely to pay attention when they are called by their name; however, they have shown to be less effective with older students. Teens who feel insecure about their identity would rather not be singled out in a group of their peers.

Students Need to Touch

It is difficult for small children to resist reaching out to touch sculptures and works of art that offer delicious tactile surfaces. Touch is a natural proclivity and children are hard-wired to gather information about their environment from their senses. To gratify young children in small groups with adult chaperones, I provide spongy, squeezable objects to hold on the tour. Older children are instructed to bring their sketchbooks to work on study sketches and assignments as they walk during a tour. It makes good sense to also offer a reason for not being allowed to touch the artwork. A docent might say, “Some of the pieces in this museum are old and irreplaceable. To insure that they are still here for visitors in the years to come, what do you think we should consider to make sure they remain undamaged?” Feasible responses might include no touching, no camera flashes, control temperature and humidity, etc. With an investment in securing longevity, students will enforce a “no touch” policy among themselves.



It makes good sense to offer a reason for not being allowed to touch the artwork.

Students Need to be the Center of the Universe

Considering the audience and the egocentricity of youth, docents should craft questions that tap into their age and interests to provoke authentic conversations. The conversations will move forward as docents listen to insights that students offer with sensitivity and perceptivity.⁷ I have enjoyed stepping into the fantasy world of kids, where anything can happen, to begin authentic conversations with students. When questioning stirs imagination about works of art, students are formulating responses that are constructed with divergent thinking. Of all the strategic tools presented here, discussion about artworks is the method of engagement for which docents feel the most confident. Although their sense of proficiency to pose questions comes from training and conversations with adult visitors, questions must be compellingly targeted to a young persons' frame of reference. Questions about *works of art* that appeal to youth are:

1. If you were to step into this place, what would you hear, smell?
2. If you were to select one of the landscapes to step into, which one would you choose? Why?
3. If this painting or drawing were a scene from a movie, what would happen next?
4. If we could eavesdrop on the subjects in this piece, what would they be saying?

Questions about *artists* that are effective in sustaining student interest are:

1. Can you tell anything about the artist by looking at his/her work?
2. If the artist were here, what questions would you ask him/her?
3. Would you recommend that the artist change anything?

Questions that are relevant to the *viewer student* personally are also worth exploring:

1. If you weren't able to talk, hear or write, how would you communicate?
2. If you were to select one piece from this gallery, which would you like to have in your home?
3. Have you ever painted a portrait, carved wood, etc.? Was it easy or difficult?
4. Which piece in this gallery is most like your own artwork?

It is paramount that a docent's attitude toward students is genuinely nurturing and that her tone is conversational. Efforts to create a classroom

environment will distance docents from students. Since the goal is to build a personal connection for a student with a work of art, keeping the communication warm and human will clinch the deal. Eye contact, an accepting smile, and full-on attention to the speaking student go a long way to dissuade student reticence. They are less hesitant to speak up if they have been reassured that their responses are not being evaluated as “right” or “wrong.” Also, when students volunteer details, observations, and insights and receive positive feedback from educators, their endorsed response paves the way for more student discourse.

Students Need Enthusiasm and Simplicity to Keep Them Engaged

On past museum tours with my students, I have observed how readily they blossom in the company of docents who are authentically, passionately themselves. Enthusiasm about the artworks heightens contagion in a group when the docent leads with appropriate excitability and possibly humor (not facetious or sarcastic). Short informational statements that begin with “as you know” can direct students to share their observations. Keep it simple because students are easily distracted. Deliver information in synopsis form. Draw out inattentive students with personal questions. “John, your expression reminds me of the one the subject in this painting is showing. Do you think he feels like you are feeling now? Do you see any clues in the painting that could be the reason for this?” Aim a question to overly loquacious students but ask them to choose a peer to respond. Redirect group attention that is focused on students making inappropriate remarks by asking incongruous questions to stymie their potentially devastating trajectory. Questions like, “Do you dream about flying, Curt?” or “When is your birthday?” Look at them quizzically (after they comment), and then say nothing. When all else fails, ask the chaperone to respond.

Group comments “are like balls in the air, juggled by the instructor, who moves quickly and decisively to keep them up and active as long as possible.”⁸ When this happens, the group understands that the docent is not the only one with knowledge, that knowledge is a collective experience. Establishing this understanding is especially helpful with teens who hold disdain for being patronized. The mechanism that enables docent enthusiasm to talk about the same work of art over and over again is built upon the realization that with every group, the meaning changes and the dialogue is different.⁹ It is best that students are not leveled with a heap of information from the outset because the group should not see the works of art first as “artifacts of history but should attend to the here-and-now physical presence.”¹⁰

Students Need a Reason to Learn

Challenge students because they need a reason to learn. Learning that comes from an urgency to know is compelling. When students are intrinsically motivated to seek answers to their questions, they do so with fervent compulsion. A successful collaboration program between university researchers and children in community centers was guided by two principles of engagement. The first was that young people learn best when they are engaged in activities that allow them to “ask questions, explore phenomena, construct their own theories, and express their developing understandings in language that is meaningful to them.”¹¹ For this to happen, the adults in the team permitted the students to lead their own learning. It was discovered that a critical aspect of engagement in the research was the development of positive attitudes toward learning.

There are a number of strategies that construct learning for student visitors. Token responses, die-cut symbols (hearts = favorite; award = most famous, etc.) or props, can be distributed to students to match with works of art that they select.¹² Students can also match onomatopoeia cards (splat, crash, buzz, etc.) with works that exemplify the term for them. Send student “art detectives” on a mission to uncover a mystery. Tell them they are about to see “an amazing depiction of a...” Have them select items from a list of components (concepts, subjects, shapes) as they walk through the galleries and combine them into a composite drawing or poem. Set up team competitions (to tap into the peer acceptance phenomenon). Give two teams the same challenge to be accomplished by a time limit (i.e. “How many paintings in this gallery depict time? Find them, list the titles, and explain the element of time in each. You have 5 minutes.”) Challenging questions begin with phrases much like, “What would happen if...?” and “I wonder if there are any other paintings in the museum with...?” When docents approach groups with problem-centered tasks that send students out to find solutions, engagement is sure to spike.

Students Need to Learn in an Environment that Feels “Safe”

Standing in front of a work of art is an enjoyable experience. Looking leads to observations and observations begin a conversation that is really a collective investigation. The casualness of the discussion is actually what students find irresistible about out-of-classroom learning. Everyone shares ideas randomly, some see things others do not, but many voices make the conversation richer.¹³ The more responses that emerge from a group, the deeper the offered insights become, leading to a better understanding of what students in the group are seeing.

Some students may ask several questions, while others silently ponder. The need for peer acceptance can drive teenagers to remain unresponsive because they want to avoid saying the “wrong thing” and embarrassing themselves in front of their peers. Docents can divert potential anxiety by announcing that everyone is welcome into the conversation but not everyone is required to actively contribute. If docents detect tension between individual students they can summarize insights to salvage the group’s experience.¹⁴

Not discussed in this article is provision for unstructured time for students’ self-directed engagement with the works of art on exhibit. Current theories of informal learning emphasize allowing time for free-roaming exploration of the learner.¹⁵ Docents should plan ample time for students to browse through exhibits with freedom to travel at their own pace.

Terms of Engagement Self-Efficacy

The goal for the session was to raise the self-efficacy of docent learners by putting four sources of self-efficacy into action. The first source, enactive mastery experience, proved to be the most influential. Much like the platform upon which video games are designed, enactive mastery experiences move us forward from one success to another, from a simple task to a task of a greater challenge. The amalgamation of all the successes we have experienced in particular situations and environments allow us to feel confident about future tasks with similarities. Furthermore, when achievement helps to overcome adversity, robust self-efficacy beliefs emerge to fine tune our abilities.¹⁶ At intervals in our discussions during the sessions, I asked docents to talk about their successes with students. Slowly one by one, then effusively, their stories came to light. The more they shared, the more potent the group affirmation grew. As the session continued, I could sense that their acknowledgment of successful experiences was indeed enacting their self-efficacy with students whom they would meet in the future. A quiet docent sitting in the back offered a reflection that encouraged others. She said, “I try to remember that when students are non-responsive, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they aren’t taking in the art and discussion. Everyone reacts in their own time and perhaps they are simply taking it all in and need to sit with a work of art longer.”

Self-efficacy gained by observing events that are modeled by individuals with whom we identify is known as vicarious experience, a second source. These experiences enable learners to appraise their own capabilities in relation

to the attainments of the modeler.¹⁷ Of course, the effects on self-efficacy vary with the skill of the modeler, but when learners watch someone with capabilities similar to their own, their self-efficacy beliefs are raised. They are convinced that they will achieve the same outcomes. During the session, I described several key encounters with students to demonstrate engagement strategies in action. I played the roles of both student and teacher and asked docents to visualize themselves in each situation using the modeled strategy.

Several docents expressed convictions that the modeled strategy would work for them. One declared, "In your presentation you continually demonstrated a somewhat irreverent sense of humor and bucket-loads of enthusiasm, which are inspirational." Another affirmed, "Several tips spoke to me: draw disinterested students into the group with personal questions, and ask overly loquacious students a question then have them choose a friend to answer are actions I will incorporate into my tours."

Self-efficacy beliefs of a learner can be enhanced through a third source: verbal persuasion. Telling learners that they will be successful jump-starts new experiences and initiates a positive perception of self, which leads learners to rally and sustain greater effort to achieve success than those who are stalled by solitary self-doubt. During my presentation, I paused after demonstrating a strategy, swept my eyes across the audience of docents and said, "I am sure you are already doing something like this with students," and "this is so easy, when you ask, 'What do you see?' students are eager to answer." I saw heads bobbing and smiles break out like the noonday sun. They were ready for success because they were convinced that they were capable of achieving it.

Finally, the fourth source of self-efficacy occurs in environments where positive somatic, physiological, and affective states are enhanced. In other words, learning that takes place in a pleasurable environment where learners feel comfortable and safe is likely to effect success in the performance of a task.¹⁸ Conversely, positive self-efficacy dissolves with elevated stress and anxiety. Art teachers who teach with humor not only help their students to springboard into creative endeavors but assist in their own instructional efficacy growth.¹⁹ To be sure, there was plenty of docent laughter and light-heartedness during our session. Fear of failure vanished. Docents' perceptions of their capacity soared and their capacity to utilize engagement strategies was primed. I conducted informal interviews with approximately 20 docents following the session and all reflected positive affirmations that they felt more confident to engage students.

Method: Follow Up Survey

Several days after the professional development session at the McNay, Kate sent out a belief-sampling survey to docent participants. The survey instrument was constructed with five open-ended, reflective writing prompts and permitted respondents to remain anonymous. Our intent was to determine if a change in perceptions of docents' ability to engage youth had come about after attending *Working with Disengaged Students in Group Tours*. The qualitative data that was collected from five docents on the survey item responses confirmed that docents' perceptions of their engagement capability had been raised.

Results

Overall, reoccurring response themes from the survey responses disclosed that docents were experiencing an abiding sense of self-efficacy. A common theme in all of the responses was a change in perceptions about the ability to engage youth. "I feel much more confident now that I have some go-to strategies. All of the points in the presentation are beneficial in engaging our students. I will refer to these notes frequently," a docent announced. Another added, "Overall, the presentation confirmed that I am on target with some strategies that I already use, but gave many additional ideas and suggested questions that will be extremely beneficial in working with disengaged students — as well as those who are engaged." A third docent confirmed his appropriation of the session content, "I find it most effective to set the tone for the tour by letting the audience know who I am, we will have fun and I am here to give them an opportunity to explore, express their needs, and participate." A docent summarizing what she had gleaned from the session said, "I like knowing and understanding about common similarities of student groups, the disengagement spectrum, and the great ideas and types of questioning techniques to use to maximize engagement."

One survey item prompted docents to identify which presented strategy had encouraged them the most. A docent reflected, "The 'keep it simple' strategy. I feel that I am enthusiastic in my tours, but will definitely utilize the suggested strategies of delivering information in synopsis form." Another docent revealed, "I liked the idea of engaging the chaperone. I have done it twice since the lecture and it helps to give a more meaningful tour. I often find they are interested in something other than planned. So I change." Another docent added that she would employ two strategies: "Reinforcing being

spontaneous; changing the planned presentation when not working.” A response to children’s need for tactile stimulation was, “I like the idea about touching things. I have used this recently. We are lucky to have the patio as there are many things to be touched there.” A docent summarized, “several tips spoke to me: draw disinterested students into the group with personal questions and, for overly loquacious students, ask them a question and have them choose a friend to answer are actions I will incorporate into my tours in the future.”

Discussion and Conclusion

Engaging young visitors in an art museum is a challenge. This article offers art museum educators a practical approach to capture and sustain the attention of youth. The goal for this study was to raise docents’ perceptions of their ability to engage youth with works of art. To this end, I presented simple strategies in a docents’ continuing education session — strategies to build knowledge and capacity for engagement. I developed these strategic tools to raise perceptions of art educators’ capabilities to meet the needs of students in their classrooms. I implemented four critical sources of self-efficacy as I presented to docents strategies that were targeted for specific student needs. Engagement self-efficacy rose as they embraced new knowledge and skills; responses on post-session surveys indicated a positive change in docent beliefs.

I suggest that engaging youth in the informal context of museums be a focus of educational programs and subsequent studies. Docents themselves acknowledge that the issue of youth inattentiveness is worth pursuing. I observed an eagerness among docents to explore the topic further. Docents confirmed that the topic of engaging students is something that needs to be revisited regularly: “Role playing activities and sharing strategies or activities that lend themselves to certain works in the collection.” I applaud Kate Carey for sustaining McNay docents with “professional development and ongoing learning to enhance their effectiveness as art museum educators.”²⁰

Methodologies for institutions to elevate educator self-efficacy are of practical and theoretical importance for the field of education.²¹ I recommend that museum education programs strive to develop docent skills that will assist them in overcoming discomfort with leading youth groups. Proven to be effective with art teachers and now art docents, educators may want to appropriate the methods described in this article to boost rapport with their students.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

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About the Author

Dr. Teri Evans-Palmer (te10@txstate.edu), assistant professor of art education at Texas State University-San Marcos, has taught K-12 visual arts and led students in self-guided museum tours for years. Her research focus on raising teacher beliefs of their effectiveness with student engagement invited collaboration with Kate Carey (kate.carey@mcnayart.org), Director of Education at the McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, and led to the investigation for this article.

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Journal of Museum Education Reader Guide

Raising Docent Confidence in Engaging Students on School Tours

Teri Evans-Palmer

As museum educators, we know the value and benefits of dialogue as well as the importance of reflective practice. The questions below were developed in conjunction with the author and are intended to foster conversations among colleagues, education departments, gallery educators, and volunteers, especially docents and docent managers.

Discussion Questions:

1. As docents or gallery teachers, what strategies/tips from the article did you find helpful for engaging students?
2. Evans-Palmer discusses locker room pep talk that she gave docents. Take a minute to role play a pep talk you could give your docent or gallery teaching core.
3. Included in the article are several questions that Evans-Palmer uses to engage students with works of art. What are some questions you have used that work well with students?
4. Share some of your positive experiences and frustrating ones. How could you apply some of Evans-Palmer's strategies? What effective strategies have you used in the past?
5. If you have integrated tactile objects or experiences into your gallery teaching, share some successful examples and some not so successful ones.
6. What are some ways to use art making/studio/hands-on experiences in the museum galleries?
7. How can/do you use technology to increase interactivity and engagement with students?
8. What would you like to ask the author?
9. How could facilitated informal sessions that permit you to share specific student engagement scenarios with fellow docents be helpful? How frequently should they be scheduled? (bi-monthly, semi-annually, annually?)
10. What current research about student engagement do you think would be especially helpful to you?

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