

At the 2012 NAEA Conference, I had the pleasure of listening to a presentation of the collaboration between Yale Center for British Art and Chapel Haven. It is thought provoking to hear about successful art programs for adults with special needs. I hope you enjoy the article.

“Never A Dull Moment”: Collaborative Programming for Adults with Special Needs at an Art Museum

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Since 2010, the Yale Center for British Art (YCBA) has collaborated with Chapel Haven, a transitional school for independent living for adults with special needs. Chapel Haven provides a program of individualized support services for adults with cognitive and social disabilities, enabling them to live independent and productive lives. Students enrolled in their “Out to Art” class visit the YCBA weekly. Museum educators, volunteer docents, and the school’s art director lead the two-hour classes that include close-looking at works of art, studio activities, and behind-the-scene tours.

Through our experience, we have identified five key elements for a successful partnership between a museum and a school for people with special needs. These are:

1. Engage all staff.

While this partnership is between the YCBA’s education department and the school, support of all museum staff is critical. Creating a positive relationship with security is of paramount importance. An informed security staff creates a welcoming foundation and promotes appropriate museum etiquette without alienating students. In addition, special lessons by curators make students feel part of the museum community.



2. Make students comfortable.

First impression is crucial to how students feel at the museum. Educators must remember that the museum space can be intimidating and take mitigating steps. When teachers, security, and information volunteers greet students by name as soon as they enter, students feel that they are welcome. One of our students reported that, “There is never a dull moment. People [at the museum] make you feel good.” Repetition can be important for comfort. Reviewing museum rules every class helps students feel confident in their behaviors and takes away uncertainty. The

first lesson of each semester begins with a walkthrough of the museum so students can navigate space independently.

3. Differentiate instruction.

Lesson plans should incorporate activities that allow everyone to participate. Sound and movement activities give all students the chance to respond, even if they struggle verbally. Directing specific questions to specific students enables everyone to share, regardless of aptitude. Although instructors plan lessons in advance, flexibility is key for responding to students' abilities and interests. Lessons consider both age and skill level; students are treated like adults, but lessons are no-fail and geared to a range of cognitive abilities.

4. Include multi-sensory elements in all lessons.

Multi-sensory elements include touch objects, music, and scents. Incorporating these into a gallery lesson increases student engagement and involvement. Multi-sensory education naturally includes multiple learning styles and is particularly useful for people who learn and process differently. Bringing multi-sensory elements into a lesson assists with memory because the experience is richer when more senses are included.



5. Provide related hands-on studio activities.

Following the gallery discussion, students spend time making art related to the lesson. Art-making gives students another opportunity to react to what they have seen in the museum. Through this form of expression they can respond individually. Making art allows students to connect with their experience in the galleries through tactile creation. No-fail activities provide students with a feeling of accomplishment when they have a final product. Collaborative art-making fosters teamwork.

Over the past four years, we have identified five elements we believe are crucial to a successful partnership between a museum and a school for people with special needs. By making students feel comfortable, they become confident, independent, repeat museum visitors. Differentiated instruction, multi-sensory elements, and art-making ensure all students learn and participate successfully. As one of our students told us, "It's really an exciting program and it's one that I feel should be expanded - should and could be expanded - to a lot of different museums."

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Mark your calendars for the Art & Special Education Symposium at Moore College of Art & Design, Philadelphia on November 9th, 2013 from 9:00 – 3:30. This free symposium features keynote speaker Juliann Dorff, Art Educator at Kent State University, followed by discussions building on the keynote address of “The Keys to Engaging All Students through Art: Be Playful and Relevant!” Let’s hear what is going on in your community and we will email the information to our SNAE members.