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[New post] The Power of the Pre Visit

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New post on **Art Museum Teaching**



The Power of the Pre Visit

by Jen Oleniczak

Written by Alex Brown and Jen Brown (Oleniczak)

Through a partnership with [The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art \(SECCA\)](#), [The Engaging Educator](#) and [ABC of NC](#), students ranging from 2 to 21 years old with [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#) came to SECCA as part of an art program funded by [The Arts Council of Winston Salem and Forsyth County](#). Prior to the museum visit, SECCA and The Engaging Educator visited each class at ABC for a Pre Visit, something new for both the museum and the school. This was also the first time the school had taken a field trip to a contemporary art museum.

While educators can all agree that programs for students on the spectrum are extremely worthwhile, many institutions, educators, and schools have [trepidation in approaching these programs](#) – but knowledge provides comfort. While the idea of setting up programming for students on the spectrum is multi-faceted, an under-discussed part of programming is the Pre Visit. Going into the Pre Visit, we prepared a visual agenda, social story, and had a touch collection. Below, find our individual reflections on the importance and outcomes of our short but powerful Pre Visits:

Feels Like the First Time – *by Alex Brown*

I am accustomed to meeting school groups 'cold' when they come in the door. I know where they're coming from, the size of the group, the age range, and I speak with teachers prior to visits to discuss the scope and expectations, but it is difficult to know the feel of a school group if I haven't met the students. Starting 'cold' and getting to know the students during a program works great most of the time, but it is simply not enough for every group. Students on the autism spectrum often require extra attention and care that can be difficult to provide with a 'cold' start. That's when the value of the Pre Visit became clear.

Typical school programs at SECCA last between an hour and an hour and a half. Since most school programs start without Pre Visits, I spend the first five to fifteen minutes with

introductions, discussions around the definitions of contemporary art, and a primer on the exhibition. This not only helps students get comfortable in an unfamiliar space and with potentially unfamiliar ideas, it also creates an opportunity for me to 'read the room' so I can find out what the students are interested in and the kind of experiences they are open to. 'Reading the room' can be anything from a discussion with the students to paying attention to body language. It becomes easier to read students as a program progresses and as discussions unfold. By the middle of a visit, most students feel comfortable in the space and are open to expressing themselves. This process can be decidedly different with students on the autism spectrum.

The ability to read an audience by paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues is based on an understanding of typical behaviors. I am not an expert on autism, but I do know that people with autism often behave in ways that do not conform to traditional behavioral norms. Their behavior is simply different, and it can't be read using typical behavior as a baseline. This is what makes it difficult to start 'cold' with people with autism. I have led programs for special needs classes, special needs organizations, and group homes, and until recently I had never done Pre Visits. I have always met the group like I would have any other. Where most students that are typically developing are comfortable by the middle of a visit, some individuals with special needs did not feel comfortable until the end, if they got comfortable at all.

Through the pilot program and partnership, we included Pre Visits with every class. We met with each class for about fifteen minutes, and in that time we got to know the students, the students got to know us, and we introduced the students to SECCA, the exhibition, and museum expectations using a social story. The value of a Pre Visit became immediately apparent. In one of the pre-kindergarten classes, some students began to cry and showed signs of anxiety when we waked in the room. By the end of our visit, a student who was in tears when I walked in the room had taken me by the hand to show me around her classroom. Responses varied from student to student, but through the Pre Visits we established a shared foundation of comfort with the students. A foundation that carried over to their SECCA visits, eliminating the need to start 'cold' and opening more time to explore, experience, and make art.

It's Not Just You, It's Me – by Jen Brown (Oleniczak)

I haven't always been a fan of the Pre Visit. So much of what I believe in with improv-based education is the idea of focusing on the current moment – maintaining a presence in the here and now to honestly react and respond to that here and now. Initially, it seemed a bit contradictory to have a Pre Visit with that mentality. The 'secret' I've discovered after doing a lot of Pre Visits through multiple organizations, including The Engaging Educator, is: the Pre Visit is as much for me as it is for the students.

As one of the people that initiated this partnership, I was insistent on the aspect of a Pre Visit. Modeling the program after the [Guggenheim for All program](#), I saw a lot of success in getting the students 'ready' for their visit to the museum, as well as preparing the teachers with expectations. As an educator that has worked with students on the autism spectrum, as well as an improv advocate, my mentality behind the Pre Visit need was

simple: while when you've worked with one person with autism, you've worked with one person with autism, and people are different every moment, it's imperative to understand individuals where they feel comfortable and where they don't. Yes, every child would be different. Yes, we were going to roll with it and be flexible and connect to the moment – but spontaneity? NOPE.

Now is a good moment to dispel a misconception about me as an educator. I plan. A LOT. I over plan. A LOT. The reason I over plan? So I can be flexible within a great big structure I've planned for myself, scrap things when necessary, pivot on a dime, and connect to the people in front of me. That's improv.

Back to the Pre Visit – by going into the students' classrooms, a space where they understand expectations, rules, and interactions - we could see how they connected with those consistent expectations, rules, and space. We could see that the high school class was VERY responsive to the prompts given to them, that the elementary class moved around a lot and like to hold our hands, and that the kindergarten class loved counting. We noticed the wanderers and the ways the teachers interacted with the students by saying, "follow the leader" to line up and the student's attention span.

Yes, the students got to know us. Absolutely, they heard the social story, learned the expectations, practiced a 'museum walk,' and touched samples that would also be at the museum. We got to tailor and inform where we met the kids because of the Pre Visit. We were able to connect with them at a completely different level and prepare with more than just the teacher information (which is so valuable! Never stop doing this, teachers!)

There is an improv and storytelling principle of "starting in the middle" – essentially you get more accomplished by starting in the center of a conversation versus using time with exposition. The same happens with a Pre Visit – instead of using time to assess the group, you have a baseline. You can begin in the middle, and fine-tune the plan based on the individual moment of that student – the student you already have a relationship with. And how much better is that museum visit when you've increased your structure – when you've over planned for things, thought of possibilities, different directions, and prepared properly for anything? That's where my flexibility as an educator comes in. Not from an "anything goes" attitude, but a larger structure to move around in. And a Pre Visit built into a special needs program, specifically one for students on the autism spectrum, makes my structure even larger, and my flexibility even smoother.

Have you had success with a Pre Visit program, or working with students on the autism spectrum? Share your comments, challenges, or best practices.

About the Authors

JEN BROWN (OLENICZAK): Founder and Artistic Director of [The Engaging Educator](#), a NYC, LA and Winston Salem based organization that specializes in improv based education and development for the advancement of professional, social and communication skills. Through The Engaging Educator, her pedagogical approach has trained educators, students, professionals and individuals from organizations such as W Magazine, SFMOMA, Viacom, Columbia University, The Field Museum, MOMA, UNICEF, and Saks 5th Avenue. Recently the company opened a non-profit Foundation,

offering free and low cost improv workshops to educators, at-risk teens and adults, and individuals on the autism spectrum. She holds degrees and accreditation from Marquette University, City College of New York, St. Joseph's University and Second City.

ALEX BROWN: Programs Coordinator and museum educator at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. As a member of both the curatorial and education departments at SECCA, Alex designs, develops and leads educational programs, family programs, exhibition and non-exhibition-related programs and film programs. In collaboration with the Curator of Contemporary Art and the Curator of education, he is also responsible for creating SECCA's interpretive materials. By developing and offering programs that appeal to more than just one audience, Alex strives to make contemporary art approachable and accessible to everyone. He holds a B.A in History, Ancient Civilizations and Classics from the University of Iowa and a M.A in Museum Studies from Western Illinois University.

[Jen Oleniczak](#) | May 9, 2016 at 10:10 am | Tags: [accessibility](#), [autism](#), [gallery teaching](#), [high school](#), [improv](#), [inclusion](#), [museum education](#), [previsit](#), [school tours](#), [schools](#), [student learning](#), [student-centered learning](#), [teaching](#) | Categories: [Spotlight on Practice](#), [Teaching Tools](#) | URL: <http://wp.me/p1V79B-13L>

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