

How to Engage with Young People



Museums and galleries often find it challenging to reach and engage with young adult and teenage audiences. How can you attract young people to your organisation, and more importantly how can you motivate and retain a young audience?

This guide is designed to help you engage young people in your museum or gallery. The following pointers are applicable to all programs regardless of scale, from one-off artist workshops and school visits to longer engagements such as youth committees, teen nights or art shows.

We recognise you may not be able to implement all of the following ideas into your programming, but even implementing just one will begin to make a difference to the way young people engage with your organisation.

Why engage with young audiences?

Benefits for the organisation

Engaging with young people can have a lot of benefits for your museum or gallery. Involving young people in formal and informal programs can stimulate fresh ideas and approaches by bringing new voices to your organisation. Young people can also help to grow new audiences by acting as active ambassadors amongst their peers. Most importantly, people who visit cultural institutions as children are more likely to be visitors as adults (Dilen: <https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/06/16/60-recent-visitors-attended-cultural-organizations-children-data/>). Thus, engaging young people in your programs now will influence future visitation.

Benefits for the audience

Benefits also extend to young people themselves. Studies show that young people who are involved in the arts display more positive academic and personal wellbeing outcomes than those who are not (USyd: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2013/09/27/participation-in-the-arts-aids-students-in-the-classroom-and-lif.html>).

Teenage involvement in museum and gallery programs has also been proven to result in a number of positive short and long-term outcomes including a growth in participants' sense of identity and the development of lifelong relationships with museums and culture (Whitney: <https://whitney.org/education/teens/room-to-rise>).

Before you start

Before your organisation launches into programming for young people, be clear about the following points:

- How young people will benefit from being involved with specific programs i.e. building career skills and experience, growing social networks, creative and personal development.
- What your organisation wants to achieve by working with young people.
- The scope of activities and resources your organisation can offer.
- How your organisation will follow-up or continue to engage young people post-program.
- How your organisation will evaluate success.

What role can young people play in your organisation?

Young people do not always have to be the student. When deciding what type of programming to undertake, think about the roles that young people can potentially play in your organisation, including as:

- Audiences
- Participants
- Critics
- Curators
- Guides
- Staff, volunteers and ambassadors
- Advisors and decision-makers

How to reach young audiences:

Build sustainable networks

One of the best ways to recruit young people is by building relationships with subject teachers and schools, as they are often key in connecting students with external opportunities. Directly contact local teachers in your area to inform them about the programs your organisation is running and what you can offer their students.

Also extend your networks beyond schools to target youth organisations. This could include recreation clubs, youth services or special interest groups such as theatre and performing arts companies. Consider organisations that might have networks with young people who may not currently have access to the arts.

Enlist young people to help spread the word about your programs. Contact young people who have been involved in your organisation and ask for their help. If your organisation has a social media presence, use it!

Even if young people aren't currently engaging with your social media platforms it might capture someone in their network, like a parent or teacher. Finding a creative partner for your project can also be an added attraction for young people. This could be a local artist, youth organisation or even brand that is seeking youth engagement.

Values for engaging with young people

Any program that your organisation decides to offer should encourage young people to see museums and galleries as places they are welcomed, supported and have a sense of ownership in. Integrating the following values into your programs can help achieve this:

Collaborative and peer-led

No matter the scale, collaborative and peer-led programs (where young people get to make the decisions) are key to engaging with young people. Peer-led learning is proven to build young people's critical thinking and confidence, and it supports participants to realise their ideas in collaboration with each other.

Programs should allow young people to work collaboratively with artists, peers and other participants to explore their own ideas. Participatory artist-run workshops, artist's talks and demonstrations are a great way to achieve this. Similarly, giving young people exclusive access to other museum and gallery departments and staff can stimulate ideas, discussion and questions.

Where possible, especially if undertaking larger projects such as youth council or ambassador programs, involve young people in the programming process. By doing this, your organisation will learn about what young people want directly from them.

This helps create a sense of shared ownership and acknowledges young people as individuals with much to contribute. Young people have the ability to develop and present programming in your organisation that appeals to other young people (even better than adults can).

Authentic

An authentic program allows young people the chance to voice their ideas and engage in decision-making. It also includes a real-world outcome, so young people can share their achievements and feel a sense of pride. This could be accomplished by displaying young people's work in your exhibition spaces, hosting a post-program event for parents and friends to see participants' work or even allowing young people to plan their own event at your organisation.

Relevant to their interests

Relax, your organisation does not always need to know what young people are interested in at the present moment. Instead, create tasks that include a degree of personalisation or customisation so young people have an opportunity to explore and express their own interests, values and identity.

The opportunity to make choices gives young people a sense of ownership over their own learning agenda. In smaller programs, this could even be as simple as asking what artworks they would like to look at, or what subject matter they would like to explore in making activities.

Open-ended

When looking and talking about art, young people need to be supported to make meaningful connections and interpretations based on their own experiences. This can be achieved through inquiry-based gallery discussions that focus young people's personal responses to works, rather than labels. Close observation followed by openended conversations gives young people confidence to bring their own ideas, personal histories and beliefs to the work, rather than focusing on learning specific information.

Social

Social opportunities where participants can learn with and from their peers play an important role in programs for young people. This is supported by studies that show that students are more likely to remember social and personally relevant aspects of museum visits. Programs should allow young people to see themselves as a community of artists sharing and learning from each other.

Participative

Audiences are no longer considered as passive receivers of knowledge, and this is especially true for young people. Incorporate learning into your programs that involves participation and hands on activity in multi-sensory ways. This could involve drawing or performing responses to works in the exhibition, instead of writing.

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Practical Considerations:

Create a contact

Where possible, have a consistent key contact person for your informal programs that participants can become familiar with. This is especially important when planning for longer engagements, such as youth committees. Consistency is not only key in building mutual trust and respect, but sustained relationships within your museum or gallery can also make young people feel known and valued.

Set the tone

In all programs for young people, ensure you create a safe and supportive environment, where all participants, and their ideas, are respected and welcomed. This can be discussed by the facilitator at the beginning of a program to set expectations.

Keep it structured

Even when programs are collaborative and peer-led, it's important to have a structure. Ensure that the participants know what they are going to be doing, when and where. Make the goal, or outcome, of the session clear so that participants have something to work towards and understand what their role is.

Personalised, not standardised:

Even if you are delivering a formal learning program with a school group, this should be tailored to their individual needs. Before the visit, ask the teacher for more contextual information about what their class is learning about, or what they would like the program to focus on. Often teachers bring their classes to museums and galleries to gain a different learning experience to the classroom – so don't worry about being curriculum experts.

Examples from our stakeholders:

One of the best ways to find out what successful work with young people looks like is to look at case studies of similar activities, or talk to people about their experiences. Here are some recent activities run by our stakeholders that reflect the values discussed above:

Hurstville Museum and Gallery: *TALK our language*

In 2017, Hurstville Museum and Gallery and Georges River Council hosted a participatory photographic project that celebrated young Indigenous Australians and circulated the Dharug language through the community.

During the project, Dharug Elders Jacinta Tobin and Richard Green along with artist Sarah Rhodes collaborated with students to examine their personal stories and notions of identity. They reflected on what it means to be Indigenous today through their place at school, how they fit into their family and the broader community.

These workshops gave Indigenous teenagers the opportunity to learn about and bring life back to the Dharug language. They were then empowered to share their stories through photography and language.

Students were given one-on-one sessions with Sarah Rhodes to create an image, which featured in the exhibition *Our story, our dreaming* at Hurstville Museum and Gallery. The images also became part of a series of postcards handed out in the community. You can also engage with the project on YouTube

TALK our language is an excellent example of a collaborative, interest-driven project with an authentic outcome.

Bathurst Regional Gallery: *Generation Art*

In 2016, BRAG partnered with Australian Catholic University (ACU) on a pilot program for young people. Eleven Year 10 students were invited to engage in a 13-week enrichment program to immerse themselves in the gallery's operations and permanent collection by working with local artists, arts workers and gallery staff. Students responded positively to the opportunity to talk face-to-face with artists and gain a first-hand understanding of the artmaking process. Particularly important to the students was gaining exposure to local artists as practitioners who have started from "where we're at."

Students were supported to create collaborative digital stories presenting their own experiences of artworks in Bathurst's permanent collection. These digital stories were published as YouTube videos on the BRAG website.

The collaborative and authentic nature of the task led to positive outcomes that made some participants feel "more like an adult than a student." As one student noted, "in the regular art classroom you are like kind of assigned with something to do and you do it, whereas here it's... a very warm embrace."

Wanneroo Library and Cultural Centre: *Montages: The Full Cut 1999–2015* Filmmaking Workshops

Supported by the Engaging Art initiative, Wanneroo Library and Cultural Centre offered free workshops to school groups within the City of Wanneroo in conjunction with the Tracey Moffatt and Garry Hillberg exhibition *Montages: The Full Cut 1999-2015*.

Participants learnt film making techniques with Gary Hillberg and local Martu filmmaker Curtis Taylor, and then created their own short films using their personal devices. To provide an authentic outcome, the completed films will later be screened at the Wanneroo Library and Cultural Centre as part of the Yokayi exhibition.

Teachers and students particularly appreciated the participatory nature of the program and the chance for students to engage with artists in a workshop setting. This allowed students to take ownership of their film and work collaboratively.

NERAM International Student Ambassador Program

In 2017 New England Regional Museum launched their Student Ambassador program, which aims to connect international students at the University of New England with the local community. The program offers participants an opportunity to discover Australian art and culture through a series of special events, activities and classes at NERAM. Activities have included a workshop with a local artist to photograph the architecture in central Armidale. Events have included the BIG arty Barbie, an informal introduction to NERAM with art talks and workshops, live music and entertainment and free food.

This social, interest-driven program is a successful example of how to build sustainable networks to reach new audiences.

You might also like:

TALK our language

Hurstville Museum and Gallery

<https://lmgeblog.wordpress.com/2017/04/06/talk-our-language/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLftr3ocAM>

60% Of Recent Visitors Attended Cultural Organizations As Children

Colleen Dilen

<https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/06/16/60-recent-visitors-attended-cultural-organizations-children-data/>

Room to Rise: The Lasting Impact of Intensive Teen Programs in Art Museums

Whitney Museum of American Art

<https://whitney.org/education/teens/room-to-rise>

Digital Engagement: Connecting With Your Audiences

Museums & Galleries of NSW

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/digital/digital-engagement/>



This resource was written by freelance education writer and consultant **Amy Bambach** as part of Museums & Galleries of NSW's Engaging Art initiative. To find out more about *Engaging Art* visit: <https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/programs/cultural-mediation/engaging-art-initiative/>

Engaging Art has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.