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Somi Lee

ABSTRACT
At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, students in an art education course design and lead peer-led experiences at Krannert Art Museum for peers in an introductory art course. The program has run for three annual cycles, each with a new cohort of ARTE 260 student facilitators. The present study draws on survey data and written reflections collected during Spring 2026. Student facilitators described a recurring pattern: most entered the experience positioned as teachers, then found greater effectiveness once stepping into a facilitator role. The data suggest that peer-led experiences at university art museums function as sites where pre-service art educators begin to form professional identities and where first-year students build personal connections to museum collections.

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Introduction

Imagine a Tuesday afternoon in March at Krannert Art Museum. Seven undergraduate students sit in folding chairs in the Gelvin Noel Gallery, sketchpads balanced on their knees. A junior in art education stands beside *Kozangrodek III*, a 1973 relief collage by Frank Stella, and asks: what holds all these shapes together? All seven students are talking at once, debating whether the work is about order or its breakdown. The student facilitator steps back. She does not correct anyone. She waits.[1]

Gallery exchanges of this kind are the reason the instructor built a program, now in its third year, in which undergraduates enrolled in ARTE 260 (Art Education) design and lead peer-led gallery experiences at Krannert Art Museum (KAM) for peers enrolled in ART 140 (Introduction to Art). The student facilitators write original activities, choose artworks that connect to a teaching theme, and create worksheets that ask peer visitors to look closely and talk openly. The ART 140 students, most of them visiting KAM for the first time, arrive as participants and leave with a personal relationship to art.

The present study focuses on Spring 2026, drawing on survey responses from forty-seven of the one hundred thirty-one peer visitors enrolled in ART 140 who provided informed consent to participate in the research (36%), and written reflections from eleven student facilitators enrolled in ARTE 260. Throughout the study, ARTE 260 students who designed and led the experiences are referred to as student facilitators, and ART 140 students who participated are referred to as peer visitors. Two questions

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guide the analysis. First, how do peer visitors describe their experience of a gallery session led by undergraduate peers (the student facilitators)? Second, how do student facilitators develop as educators through the process of designing and leading peer-led gallery experiences, and what does that process reveal about the museum as a site for undergraduate learning?

Background

Museum education has long centered on the transmission of knowledge from trained adults to visitors. The constructivist museum model expanded that view by proposing that visitors build understanding through active interaction with objects and with each other.[2] The Contextual Model of Learning, which holds that every museum visit is shaped by three overlapping contexts – the personal, the sociocultural, and the physical – reinforced the point by demonstrating how prior knowledge, social relationships, and physical setting all influence what a visitor takes away.[3] A museum experience is never just about art; it is about the specific people in the room.

More recent scholarship has pushed toward participatory practices. The participatory museum functions as a gathering space where visitors contribute perspectives of their own, moving away from the model of passive reception.[4] Concrete tools for facilitating visitor engagement, including slow looking and open-ended questioning, have given educators practical strategies for teaching in art museums.[5] Multimodal research methods that document visitor engagement through gesture, gaze, and conversation have expanded the field's understanding of what counts as learning in museum spaces.[6] A recent framework for Pedagogical Curation identified teacher autonomy and relational synergy as pillars of museum-based learning.[7]

When learners share the same status, the power dynamics that typically define teacher–student relationships recede, making questioning, risk-taking, and deeper engagement more likely.[8] In museums, peer-led approaches remain relatively new. At the Yale University Art Gallery, a paid program equipped graduate students with facilitation skills over a six-to-eight-week intensive.[9] The Yale program produced lasting effects on the professional direction of participants. A defining feature of the program is its reliance on an established institutional framework: participants learned to lead experiences that the museum had already designed. What the Yale model leaves open is a program in which undergraduates design original experiences for peers, making curatorial and pedagogical decisions from the start.

Early teaching experiences shape how educators come to understand themselves professionally.[10] The language of museum education job titles has consequences for the material practices and career opportunities of museum educators.[11] Among college students, cultural experience and satisfaction predicted the likelihood of sharing museum content with others after a visit.[12] Findings on professional identity, job title, and post-visit engagement point toward a question the present study addresses directly: how do undergraduate students develop a sense of themselves as educators when they face a real audience, receive real-time feedback, and must decide in the moment whether to teach or to step back? Possible selves theory offers one lens for understanding the process. The concept of possible selves refers to the images individuals hold of what they might become, what they hope to become, and what they fear becoming, and

provides a conceptual link between cognition and motivation.[13] For undergraduates moving into early teaching roles, field placements create conditions where professional identity questions surface, even when their resolution remains incomplete.[14] The experiential learning model provides an additional theoretical frame: student facilitators move through cycles of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation as they plan, lead, and reflect on their experiences.[15]

Methodology

Setting and program history

Krannert Art Museum holds over ten thousand objects spanning European, American, Asian, African, and pre-Columbian art. The museum sits in the same complex where many ART 140 lectures take place, yet most peer visitors reported the gallery experience as their first visit to the museum.

The instructor has taught at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign for three years. In earlier iterations of ART 140, students completed independent gallery visits using a provided activity template. After taking on ARTE 260, the instructor redesigned the project so that ARTE 260 students would design and lead the experiences directly, giving them authorship over both the pedagogical decisions and the interactions with peer visitors. The redesign was motivated by two goals: to give ARTE 260 students a real audience and genuine professional responsibility, and to give ART 140 students a more structured, peer-supported encounter with the collection. ARTE 260 is offered once per year, meaning each annual cycle involves a new cohort of student facilitators. ART 140 runs every semester, providing a fresh group of peer visitors each time.

Before the program began, student facilitators spent several weeks in coursework covering foundational museum visitor experience research and examples of university museum programs. The class then visited KAM together for free exploration of the galleries and wrote short reflections on what they noticed. A period of independent research followed, during which student facilitators investigated the permanent collection, current exhibitions, and the work of museum staff. The class returned to KAM for a guided session with museum educators, who introduced facilitation techniques and a range of art-based activities. Student facilitators then designed their own experiences: selecting specific galleries or artworks, researching those objects in depth, and building lesson plans, activity sheets, rubrics, and attendance records tied to a teaching theme. Plans were shared with the full class for peer feedback and revised accordingly. Pairs of student facilitators then rehearsed their experiences on-site, testing timing and physical flow before meeting their peer visitors. After each session, peer visitors submitted survey responses and student facilitators submitted written reflections. Those reflections informed planning for the following year.

Student facilitator training

Student facilitators completed a four-week training sequence before leading their experiences. The training unfolded in four phases, each building on the previous one.

In the first phase, student facilitators visited Krannert Art Museum with a museum educator who modeled facilitation techniques in the galleries. The educator demonstrated activity examples such as slow looking exercises, open-ended questioning sequences, and small-group discussion prompts. Student facilitators took notes during the visit and then wrote reflections on what they observed, focusing on how the choices of the educator shaped visitor responses.

In the second phase, student facilitators designed their own activities. Each student facilitator selected artworks, wrote discussion prompts, and created peer visitor worksheets tied to a teaching theme. Student facilitators then presented their activity plans to the full class, sharing insights and receiving peer feedback. The presentations gave everyone access to a wider range of strategies and helped student facilitators refine their plans before entering the galleries.

In the third phase, student facilitators worked in pairs. Each experience had a lead section and a support section: one student facilitator led while the other assisted. Before the experience, student facilitators explained their planned activities to their assigned support partner so that both could coordinate transitions and anticipate logistical needs.

In the fourth phase, student facilitators rehearsed their experiences on-site at Krannert Art Museum. Rehearsals allowed student facilitators to practice the physical flow of moving a group between galleries, to test the timing of activities, and to adjust pacing in response to the actual spaces. By the time student facilitators met their peer visitors, they had moved through observation, design, peer review, and on-site practice across four weeks of preparation.

Participants and data sources

Eleven ARTE 260 student facilitators led experiences for groups of four to eight peer visitors. Forty-seven peer visitors completed a ten-item post-experience survey (out of 131 enrolled; 36% response rate). The survey included six multiple-choice items (punctuality, knowledge, responsiveness, helpfulness, pacing, and information depth) and four open-ended essay questions. Student facilitators submitted written reflections responding to five prompts: a successful moment, perceived role, handling of unexpected interpretations, deliberate simplifications, and changed thinking about museum work.

Ethics

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (IRB26-0404, Archive, Museum, and Exhibition Practices in Art and Design Education). All participants provided informed consent. Student names appear with permission.

Analysis

Frequencies and percentages summarize the multiple-choice data. Open-ended responses and student facilitator reflections were analyzed through thematic analysis.[16] Initial codes were generated from each reflection independently and then grouped into

candidate themes across all eleven student facilitators. Themes were reviewed against the full data set and refined through discussion. The dual data sources, peer visitor surveys and student facilitator reflections, allow for triangulation: peer visitor ratings and comments can be read alongside the pedagogical decisions student facilitators described making.

Findings

Peer visitor survey: quantitative results

Eighty-three percent of peer visitors said the experience started on time (Table 1). Eighty-one percent rated their student facilitator as very knowledgeable. Eighty-two percent reported that their questions were clearly answered. Among peer visitors needing logistical help, every respondent rated assistance as very helpful. Eighty-one percent found the pacing appropriate. The area with the most room for growth was information depth: seventy percent found the content sufficient, while twenty-six percent wanted more detail.

Peer visitor survey: open-ended themes

Three themes surfaced from the open-ended responses.

First, interactive activities drove engagement. Groups participated in mock auctions, thematic scavenger hunts, acted out paintings, and drew fragments of a single work to reassemble. One peer visitor described the mock auction as the moment art stopped being something on a wall and became something worth arguing about. Another noted that the skit activity turned passive viewing into a collaborative performance. The variety of activities across the eleven experiences suggests that student facilitators grasped a principle central to participatory museum practice: visitors engage more deeply when they contribute.[17]

Second, the subjectivity of interpretation came as a discovery. One peer visitor wrote that learning to look at a painting before reading the label was a turning point. The permission to have a personal response and share the response in a small group was the lesson. Several peer visitors mentioned that hearing peers offer different readings of the same artwork expanded how they understood what interpretation could mean. Student facilitators deliberately withheld labels and artist statements to create space for personal response, and peer visitors identified the space as the most valuable part of the experience.

Table 1. Multiple-choice survey responses ($n = 47$).

Survey item	Most positive	Moderate	Negative/other
Punctuality	On time: 83%	Few min late: 17%	10+ min late: 0%
Knowledge	Very knowledgeable: 81%	Somewhat: 15%	Not very/Unsure: 4%
Questions	Clearly answered: 82%	Partially: 10%	No Q/Not answered: 8%
Helpfulness	Very helpful: 53%	Did not need help: 47%	Somewhat/Not: 0%
Pacing	Well-paced: 81%	Slightly off: 10%	Far off/Unsure: 8%
Information	Sufficient: 70%	Wanted more: 26%	Not enough/None: 4%

Third, peer visitors named specific works in striking detail: the Hercules vase recovered from Pompeii, the Pacae tree sculpture from Peru, and the surrealist canvas *One Way to Quarter a Pear*. The specificity suggests that the experiences created memorable object encounters of the kind museum educators work to produce. When peer visitors can recall an object by name and describe why the object held their attention, the experience has moved beyond information transfer into the territory of personal meaning-making.

Student facilitator reflections: role identity

Five student facilitators were identified as facilitators from the start (Table 2). Four described shifting from teacher to facilitator once they launched their activity and noticed that stepping back produced stronger engagement. William described the shift directly: the teacher's role was not communicating well, so he switched to a casual, interest-driven approach, letting peer visitors discover still-life sculptures on their own. He reported that when the five-minute timer ended, peer visitors were still actively exploring the gallery, and he chose to let them continue. Audra observed a parallel pattern: she had planned discussion-heavy segments but shifted to activity-heavy ones when she realized how much peer visitors learned by talking things out on their own. Only Mae identified as a teacher throughout; her experience centered on a narrative context about the Iliad. Yumi moved from storyteller to facilitator: she opened with a brief history of the arts-versus-crafts distinction and then released peer visitors to explore the Moore Gallery of Decorative Arts with a worksheet, stepping in only when asked.

Student facilitator reflections: unexpected interpretations and changed thinking

Not one student facilitator reported correcting a peer visitor. Nicholas wrote that he was impressed by peer visitor insight and responded by affirming every interpretation, noting that validating the perspective of an audience member is what allows the audience member to connect with the pieces in the museum. Mayumi noted that two peer visitors had opposite expectations: one did not expect recent pieces, the other did not expect historical ones. Both peer visitors turned out to be surprised, which enriched the discussion. Lexia deliberately withheld artist statements so peer visitors would form their own

Table 2. Student facilitator self-reported roles and strategies ($n = 11$).

Student facilitator	Role	Primary strategy
Milla	Facilitator > Teacher	Description cards, group observations
Kim	Facilitator > Teacher	Interpretation cards, group sharing
Yumi	Storyteller > Facilitator	Arts vs. crafts discussion, worksheet
Mae	Teacher	Iliad narrative, group check-in
Nicholas	Facilitator	Open discussion, subject matter comparison
Mira	Facilitator	Free exploration, group discussion
Taya	Tour guide	Small-group discussions
Rochelle	Facilitator	Collaborative drawing, painting portions
Lexia	Facilitator	Impostor game, thematic hunt
Audra	Facilitator	Visual thinking strategy, skits
William	Teacher > Facilitator	Still-life discovery, self-guided walk

readings; she found that most peer visitors chose the same painting for a given theme but offered distinct justifications, demonstrating that convergence on an object does not preclude divergence in meaning. William went further, writing that he would have been disappointed if nobody had said anything fresh or personal about the pieces; peer visitors pointed out details in *The Lobster* and *Still Life* that he had not noticed across multiple practice runs. Rochelle reported that when a peer visitor offered a far-fetched interpretation, she encouraged the creativity and asked how the peer visitor reached the conclusion, treating the unexpected reading as evidence that the experience was working.

Ten of eleven student facilitators said the experience changed how they thought about museum work. Taya wrote that she had not realized how much planning goes into leading a group and that engaging delivery is as important as content knowledge. Nicholas compared leading the experience to performing on stage, drawing on his theater background, and noted that interacting with the group was more rewarding than performing. Audra concluded that giving peer visitors ways to discover information is more effective than telling them directly. Rochelle wrote that she now sees museum work as being about the experience of the viewer just as much as the artwork. Mayumi reported that managing a group of three was more demanding than she expected, giving her new respect for professional museum educators. Mira concluded that she would enjoy working in a museum despite pre-experience anxiety. Lexia reflected that as a child, she had encountered interactive museum activities, but as an adult, the expectation had shifted to passive listening; the experience reminded her that activity-based approaches work at every age. William described the experience as both intimidating and energizing, noting that the program invigorated his interest in museum work.

Discussion

Three points deserve attention.

First, peer-led experiences met the benchmarks typically associated with trained docents. The one area where ratings dipped, information depth, reflects deliberate choices. Milla focused on composition and color. Yumi simplified her ceramics history to keep peer visitors focused on the arts-versus-crafts distinction. Lexia withheld artist statements so peer visitors would develop independent interpretations. Taya kept explanations focused to avoid a lecture-like feel. Kim emphasized tailoring each experience to the audience in the room. The decisions reflect pedagogical instincts that prioritize engagement over coverage. The twenty-six percent who wanted more detail represent an opportunity for future cohorts: student facilitators could prepare supplementary handouts for peer visitors who want to go deeper, preserving the participatory structure while addressing the appetite for additional context. The reflections suggest that the simplifications were strategic, a distinction that matters for program design.

Second, the facilitator identity that most student facilitators described aligns with the constructivist museum model.[18] Student facilitators created the conditions the model envisions: peer visitors navigating galleries at their own pace, groups debating meaning, and student facilitators stepping back. The shift from teacher to facilitator reflects a recognition that in a museum gallery, authority lives in the objects. When peer visitors stand in front of a work and argue about what it means, the student facilitator is no longer the source of knowledge; the objects are. The experience of William

illustrates the mechanism: when he let peer visitors move through the Moore Gallery at their own pace, discovering still-life examples on their own, engagement visibly increased. Audra noticed the same pattern and shifted from discussion-heavy segments to activity-heavy ones. The program at the Yale Art Gallery trained participants within an existing institutional framework.[19] The student facilitators in the present study designed their own activities from the start, exercising the teacher autonomy identified as a pillar of museum-based learning[20]: choosing artworks, designing activities, and making real-time pacing decisions without a prescribed script.

Third, the program functions as a site for professional identity formation. Possible selves theory holds that individuals hold vivid images of who they might become, who they hope to become, and who they fear becoming, and that those images motivate present behavior.[21] For undergraduates moving into early teaching roles, field placements create conditions where professional identity questions surface, even when their resolution remains incomplete.[22] The student facilitators in the present study were not reading about facilitation; they were standing in front of real peer visitors whose questions and interpretations demanded an immediate response. Each decision – whether to correct a peer visitor, whether to extend an activity past its allotted time, whether to step back or step in – was a small act of identity formation. The labels student facilitators tested for themselves, facilitator, teacher, storyteller, tour guide, correspond closely to the hoped-for and feared possible selves that Markus and Nurius describe: a hoped-for self as a skilled facilitator who draws meaning from a room, a feared self as a lecturer who loses the audience. The comparison by Nicholas of leading an experience to performing on stage, the newfound appreciation of Taya for the invisible labor of museum educators, and the reframing by Rochelle of museum work as centered on the experience of the viewer all represent early moves in professional self-definition. The immediacy of the feedback loop gave student facilitators evidence that their pedagogical choices mattered in ways a graded assignment cannot replicate. Peer visitors described moments of personal connection that predict cultural transmission after museum visits.[23] The two data sets together suggest that peer-led experiences produce a double formation: peer visitors develop personal relationships to art, and student facilitators develop professional relationships to teaching.

Limitations and future directions

The thirty-six percent response rate may overrepresent strong reactions. Both the survey and reflections were graded, introducing possible social desirability bias. Written reflection data come from one cycle only; the first two years relied on oral formats that left insufficient records for analysis. The shift to written documentation is itself a finding and will enable longitudinal comparison over time.

A structural limitation concerns the separation of feedback channels. Peer visitors submit post-experience surveys through their own course site, while student facilitators submit reflections through a different learning management system. The two platforms do not communicate in real time, so student facilitators cannot see peer visitor feedback immediately after their experience. In an earlier cycle at a different museum, paper-based feedback was exchanged on site, but distributing and collecting physical

forms consumed time better spent on the experience. The current arrangement, digital submission followed by instructor-mediated summaries, solves the logistical problem but introduces a delay. A shared platform enabling both groups to read each other's reflections shortly after the experience would create a more reciprocal learning cycle and could itself become a data source for future research.

Direct observation of experiences and longitudinal tracking of student facilitator alumni would strengthen future studies. Video or audio recording would allow researchers to document the moments student facilitators described in their reflections: the shift from lecturing to stepping back, the decision to extend an activity when peer visitors remained engaged, and the comparison of self-reports with observable behavior.

Conclusion

On Tuesday afternoons at Krannert Art Museum, students training to become art educators lead their peers through the galleries. The peer visitors leave having debated the meaning of a surrealist pear or discovered that a centuries-old vase from Pompeii can hold their attention for twenty minutes. The student facilitators discover that the most effective thing a teacher can do, sometimes, is stop talking and let the room work. The data from Spring 2026 support these observations across every measured dimension. Three years in, the program keeps returning to the same conclusion: when students teach each other to look at art, both sides of the exchange come away changed.

Notes

1. All student names are pseudonyms.
2. Hein, *Learning in the Museum*.
3. Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*.
4. Simon, *The Participatory Museum*.
5. Burnham and Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the Art Museum*.
6. Pierroux, "Innovating Visitor Research."
7. Gregoriou, "Pedagogical Curation in Action."
8. Boud, Cohen, and Sampson, eds. *Peer Learning*.
9. Sack and Thompson, "The Wurtele Gallery Teacher."
10. Beauchamp and Thomas, "Understanding Teacher Identity."
11. Ripley and Hurley, "The Museum Education Job Taxonomy."
12. Chen, "Factors Affecting Cultural Transmission in Museum Tourism."
13. Markus and Nurius, "Possible Selves."
14. Amorim and Silva, "Can School Placement Foster Professional Identity Formation?"
15. Kolb, *Experiential Learning*.
16. Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."
17. Simon, *The Participatory Museum*.
18. Hein, *Learning in the Museum*.
19. Sack and Thompson, "Wurtele Gallery Teacher Program Method," 385–98.
20. Gregoriou, "Pedagogical Curation in Action."
21. Markus and Nurius, "Possible Selves," 954–69.
22. Amorim and Silva, "Can School Placement Foster Professional Identity Formation?" 46–60.
23. Chen, "Factors Affecting Cultural Transmission," 1–16.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Somi Lee is a teaching assistant professor in the Art Education Program, School of Art and Design, College of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where she teaches ARTE 260 and ART 140. Her research focuses on the relationship between creative production, curatorial practice, and data formation, with attention to how cultural objects are made, selected, and archived.

Data availability statement

The survey data and student facilitator reflections supporting the findings of the present study are available from the author upon reasonable request. Data are not publicly available due to privacy considerations for student participants.

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