



# **Engaging Dance Audiences: Summary Assessment of Grantees' Engagement Practices**

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ALAN S. BROWN

JENNIFER L. NOVAK-LEONARD

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## INTRODUCTION

With support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation, Dance/USA launched Engaging Dance Audiences (EDA) in 2008,<sup>1</sup> a \$2.1 million pilot grant program to assist the dance field in testing, assessing, and learning about new and refined strategies for engaging dance audiences.

**This report communicates results of research and assessment work undertaken by the EDA grantees in connection with their project support<sup>2</sup>, and is intended to help share lessons learned from the grantees' experiences with the dance field.** The other two components of the EDA initiative were:

- **A Learning Community.** At its core, EDA is a learning initiative for Dance/USA members and the dance field. The core of the learning community was built by joining the grantees through meetings, conference calls, and the use of social media to share challenges, successes, and questions throughout the course of their projects. The full Dance/USA membership was invited to share in the learning through the use of social media, webinars, in-person meetings, reports, and in other ways.
- **A National Survey of Dance Audiences.** Dance/USA commissioned WolfBrown to conduct the first, large-scale study of its kind on dance audiences. The overall purpose of the study was to provide dance presenters and producers with new information that will help them more effectively engage their audiences. The study was conducted in the summer of 2010 with the help of 42 partners<sup>3</sup> who sent a standardized survey to their dance ticket buyers.

### Grantee Research and Assessment

EDA grantees worked with WolfBrown to design and conduct a plan of research on their own audience engagement practices, with their own audiences. The purposes of this research were:

- To provide grantees with useful information that could improve their projects
- To generate data across the grantees that will inform and advance the field's knowledge of engagement practices

The original call for proposals invited a broad range of project ideas. Ultimately, nine diverse projects were supported. The nine projects were wide-ranging in their approaches and specific aims, but shared the common goal of engaging dance audiences more deeply in the art form. The project-specific EDA assessment research was designed in partnership with each grantee following an iterative assessment process from which learnings about audience engagement could be incorporated into future project activities. WolfBrown provided technical assistance to the grantees by honing research questions, designing data collection methods and tools, and providing assistance to execute

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<sup>1</sup> To access all of the materials produced from the Engaging Dance Audiences initiative, please visit <http://www.danceusa.org/engagingdanceaudiences>

<sup>2</sup> From a highly competitive field of applicants, nine Dance/USA members were funded to implement and assess new or refined audience engagement practices and share their discoveries with the dance field. To learn more about each of the nine grantees' projects, please visit <http://www.danceusa.org/engagingdanceaudiencesgrantees>

<sup>3</sup> For the list of study partners, please visit <http://www.danceusa.org/edastudypartners>



the data collection. The interim data analyses and grantee reflections on the data are archived online at <https://eda.groupsite.com>. This report communicates the overall results of the grantees' research and assessment efforts; it is not an evaluation of grantees' projects. For more information about the grantees' projects, please visit their profiles on the Dance/USA website. For your reference, hyperlinks to the online project profiles are included in the report section entitled Individual Grantee Results.

## MEASURING ENGAGEMENT

Arts groups of all disciplines devote a great deal of energy these days to assisting visitors and audiences in having deeper, more meaningful arts experiences. A wide variety of methods are being developed, including pre-event contextualization, interpretive assistance, and post-event discussions. These programs are presumed to heighten anticipation and magnify impact of the arts experience on audience members, although empirical research is scarce. Within the budgetary limitations of the initiative, this report provides a first step towards objectively assessing the extent to which the EDA-supported programs affected audiences' experiences.<sup>4</sup>

The data collection tools—which included a range of audience surveys, and focus group and interview protocols developed specifically for each of the EDA grantees' projects—utilized constructs measuring the impact of arts experiences first developed by WolfBrown in *Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of a Live Performance*.<sup>5</sup> The measurement constructs are:

- **Captivation:** The extent to which the audience member was absorbed in the performance. Captivation is the linchpin of impact—if an audience member is captivated, then other impacts are likely to happen, whereas if he is not captivated (or worse, if he snoozes through the program), other impacts are less likely to happen.
  - Example: *Did you lose track of time and forget about everything else during the performance?*
- **Intellectual Stimulation:** The degree to which the performance triggered thinking about the art, issues, or topics, or caused critical reflection.
  - Example: *Afterwards, did you discuss the performance with others who attended? If so, was this a casual exchange or an intense exchange?*

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<sup>4</sup> Several researchers have conceived models for the audience experience. These include the Australia Council's model for "the arts attendance journey" (Australia Council for the Arts, *Arts audiences online: How Australian audiences are connecting with the arts online*, 2011), which spans from the moment an audience member learns about an event to the period of time after an event during which any number of meaning-making activities might occur. At a recent Chicago workshop presented by the Arts Engagement Exchange in partnership with Illinois Institute of Technology's Institute of Design, participants were taught about "the Five Es of Experience Design" and encouraged to conceptualize the audience experience in terms of five processes: Entice, Enter, Experience, Exit, and Extend (conceived by Ben Jacobson of Conifer Research, based on the Compelling Experiences Framework created by the Dublin Group). We think more in terms of an 'arc of engagement'—different for every audience member—referring to a series of interactions and experiences leading up to, extending after, and including the arts program itself. This virtuous cycle extends, sustains and reinforces an audience member's relationship with the presenter, and builds excitement for future arts experiences. For more perspective, see *Making Sense of Audience Engagement*, by Rebecca Ratzkin and Alan S. Brown, released by the San Francisco Foundation and WolfBrown in November 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, Alan S. and Jennifer L. Novak, *Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of a Live Performance*, WolfBrown, 2007. Available at: [www.wolfbrown.com/mup](http://www.wolfbrown.com/mup)



- **Emotional Resonance:** The extent to which the audience member experienced a heightened emotional state during or after the performance.
  - Examples: *What was your emotional response to the performance?* (scale: 1=weak, 5=strong); *To what extent did you feel a bond with one or more of the dancers?*
- **Aesthetic Enrichment:** The extent to which the audience member was exposed to a new style, type of dance, or artist (growing the audience member's own aesthetic awareness), and also the extent to which the experience served to validate and celebrate familiar forms of dance (validating the audience member's aesthetic taste).
  - Example: *Did this performance expose you to a style or type of dance with which you were unfamiliar?*
- **Social Bridging and Bonding: Connectedness with the rest of the audience, new insight into one's own culture or a culture outside of one's life experience, or new perspective on human relationships or social issues.**
  - Example: *Did you feel a sense of connectedness with the rest of the audience?*

It is not reasonable to expect that a live arts experience would engage an audience member across each impact construct. The crux of this research is to understand what the differences are in impact, in engagement, and between audience members who do and audience members who do not participate in the engagement activities supported by the EDA initiative.

*For additional information on emergent themes and promising practices, refer to the full report on the Dance/USA website. A technical appendix, including all instruments and topline reports, is also available under separate cover on the Dance/USA website.*



## Walker Art Center

The Walker Art Center planned multiple programs and initiatives to broaden and deepen their connections with existing dance audiences and to engage patrons involved with visual arts. Given the multitude of EDA-funded activities that the Walker undertook, two components were selected for research and assessment. One thrust of the research was the Walker's *SpeakEasy* program, and the other was a series of audience surveys to broadly inquire about patrons' experiences with the range of offered engagement activities.

The *SpeakEasy* is a lightly facilitated post-performance discussion aimed to help dance novices discuss a dance program and learn from peers in a relaxed environment. Visual arts docents were recruited and trained to facilitate. The Walker's research focused on the *SpeakEasy* program in order to provide staff with good information about how to improve the program. The audience surveys investigated what engagement activities audience members had been exposed to or utilized prior to attending the performance, and what effect (if any) that had on their engagement with the live performance.

### *SpeakEasy*

#### Methods

Online questionnaires were used to capture feedback on participants' experiences of the *SpeakEasy* format. At each *SpeakEasy*, a Walker staff member asked attendees to provide feedback on the program, and if they consented, collected their email addresses. On the Monday following the Saturday evening *SpeakEasy*, while the program was still fresh in their minds, a link to the online questionnaire was sent to participants. In total, the Walker collected data from participants at three *SpeakEasy*s, following the performances given by Bruno Beltrao (Feb 13, 2010), Morgan Thorson/Low (March 6, 2010) and Saburo Teshigawara (April 24, 2010). To boost response rates, the Walker held a raffle for free tickets to upcoming performances.

#### Results

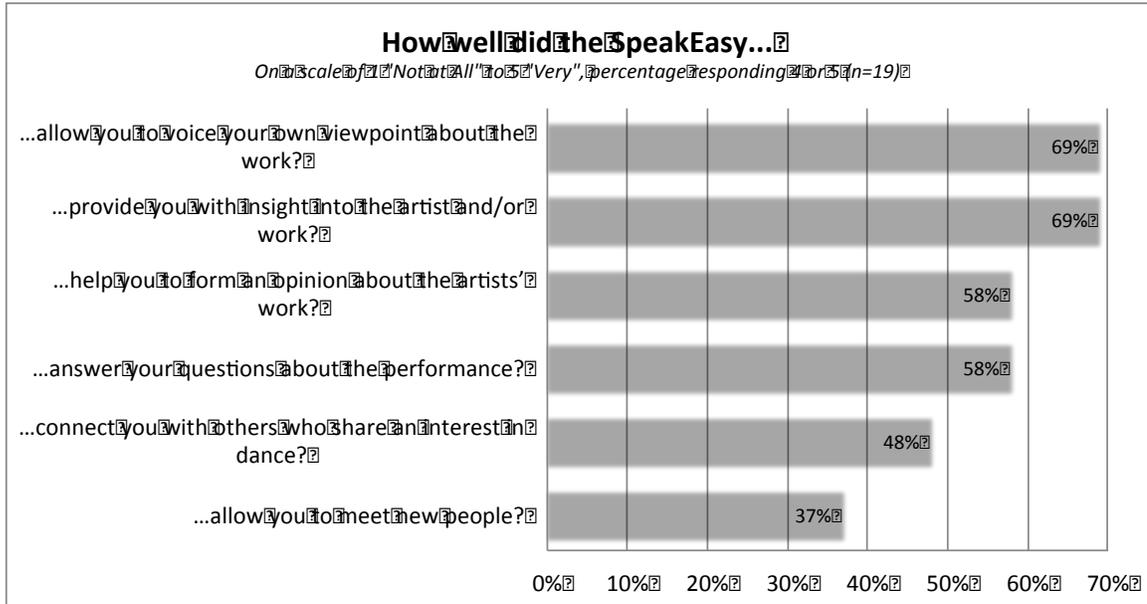
Participants' feedback about the *SpeakEasy* suggests that the peer-exchange format enabled an engaging post-performance conversation. **When asked why they attended the *SpeakEasy*, their most common response was that they wanted to**

Total attendance:	82
No. of email addresses collected:	32
No. of survey responses received:	19
Email response rate:	59%

**hear others' questions and thoughts about the piece.** When asked which aspect of the *SpeakEasy* they enjoyed the most, however, respondents were most likely to cite the opportunity to voice their own point of view about the performance. Here we see an essential duality of some post-performance discussion formats: they involve a balance of giving and taking, and different people like to play different roles. Managing this balance is one of the central challenges of the practice, for which the Walker provided an orientation for its facilitators.



**Figure 5: Walker Art Center – Outcomes and Benefits of Participation in the *SpeakEasy***



The feedback suggests that the dynamic created by the *SpeakEasy* format truly engaged people in peer exchange about the performance they had just attended.

**Audience Surveys Methods**

Paper surveys were randomly pre-set on audience members' seats prior to the show. Surveys were administered at three performances for each of three artists—John Jasperse (May 20-22, 2010), Ralph Lemon (September 23-25, 2010) and Lucinda Childs (April 7-9, 2011). To boost response rates, raffles were held for the Walker's onsite restaurant.

	<u>John Jasperse</u>		<u>Ralph Lemon</u>		<u>Lucinda Childs</u>	
	Count	Rate	Count	Rate	Count	Rate
Audience size:	439		540		870	
No. of surveys distributed:	387		459		695	
No. of surveys picked up by patrons:	242	63%	282	61%	487	70%
No. of completed surveys returned:	115	48%	179	63%	134	28%

On average, 55% of respondents reported that they had participated in at least one of the many engagement activities offered by the Walker. For the purpose of analysis, Walker's activities roughly divided into three types: post-performance programs, online offerings, and social/learning opportunities.



Walker Art Center's Offered Engagement Activities		
Post-Performance Program	Online	Social/Learning Opportunities
- SpeakEasy (post-performance conversations following certain dance programs)	- Read about, or comment on, a dance performance in the Walker blog	- Social gatherings around dance events (e.g., pre-show Think and a Drink, artist led gallery tours)
- Post performance discussions with dance artists	- Watch video or audio content <u>about dance artists</u> on the Walker Channel - Listen to Talk Dance podcast interviews on the Walker website - Read or comment on preview articles or other online content links (expanded program notes, general articles about dance) available prior to performances	- A workshop or class with visiting dance artists

Even after controlling for self-reported knowledge level of dance, participation in engagement activities—particularly post-performance, or a combination of post-performance and online activity—resulted in significantly stronger reports of impact (captivation, feeling challenged, emotional and spiritual resonance, connecting with the dancers on stage, connecting with the audience, and the impression left by the performance)<sup>24</sup> compared to those who did not participate in any engagement activities.

### Learning for the Field

- Walker’s post-performance *SpeakEasy* serves as a primary model for fostering peer-to-peer meaning making and is one of the programs that resulted in noticeably stronger reports of impact. What elements of the *SpeakEasy* can be replicated at other venues?
- The Walker offers a whole portfolio of engagement activities for its dance audiences, described in detail in its publication *A Recipe Book for Engaging Dance Audiences*. How much engagement is too much? At what point does a dance presenter encounter “declining returns” on its investments? What are the best investments? If the Walker could only offer two or three engagement activities, which should they choose?
- The Walker’s other post-performance program was more traditional in that it involved dance artists in post-show discussions. This raises interesting questions about the nature and quality of discussion that happens with and without artists in the room. While this was not a focus of our research, we did hear some focus group comments to the effect that “it is a completely different discussion” without the artist.
- In combination with the post-performance opportunity to make meaning, presenters and companies need to think about creating an arc of engagement for the audience that extends beyond the performance and likely beyond the time the audience spends in the venue. Using live performance as a centerpiece of the arc, how can audience members’ engagement with a piece be extended?

<sup>24</sup> Regression output available upon request.

