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Do As I Say, Not As I Do: A Case Study of Two Museum Docent Training Programs

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Abstract: *This comparative case study examined docent training programs, at a history museum and art gallery. Data were collected through interviews with museum educators, training and promotional materials, and observations of training. Analysis revealed that the learning theory docents are encouraged to use with visitors is not applied by museum educators during docent training.*

Introduction

Today, museums strive to provide a wide array of visitors with an engaging learning experience that promotes further discovery and return visits. To accomplish this, museum educators are encouraged to use a contextual model of learning that incorporates personal, physical, and sociocultural contexts (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Museums also employ docents to make the visitor experience engaging and rewarding. With museums emphasizing an interactive experience for visitors and docents presenting much of this to the public, it would seem appropriate for the theory of museum learning to be consistent with museum docent training. But is it? A history museum and art gallery, both with established docent programs, purport to have programs with docent training that exemplify the museums' broader educational missions.

A small body of research currently exists on docent training and development. The majority of this research focuses on training docents for a specific technique or delivery method that can be applied to their practice (Kowalski, 1994; Wolens, 1986). Other research focuses on how different audiences respond to museum interpretation and content and how that research should be used by museum educators (Falk & Dierking, 2000; G. E. Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a, 1994b; Roberts, 1997; Sachatello-Sawyer et al., 2002). However, despite the information, research, and resources available to museum educators about how people learn, it appears that very little is applied to the learning and training processes of docents.

The purpose of this comparative case study was to discover how theory and practice interact in the docent training programs at two museums. I observed multiple training programs at a history museum and an art gallery. These two institutions, located in the southeastern U.S., have well-established tour programs using docents for both school and adult groups, and each provides more than 500 tours annually. Additionally, their training programs for novice docents are approximately six months long and each site offers regular continuing education for all docents. Prior to observing the training programs, I reviewed training and educational materials published by the museums and interviewed the educator at each site about their theory of learning and the educational philosophy of their institution.

Although many museum educators draw from a solid foundation of educational theory, still more display a disparity between their theory and their work with docents. Their "espoused theory," does not translate to their actual docent training practices or "theory in use" (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Although many decisions about the design and delivery of docent training are based on existing curricula and practices, the beliefs about and theory of education the museum educator holds plays a role in how docents are prepared to work with museum visitors. Also referred to as "theories of professional practice" (Argyris & Schön, 1974), these beliefs are

presuppositions about the purpose of teaching, the role of the teacher and the student, and the teaching practices themselves.

Espoused Theory and Theory in Use

Analysis was guided by the work of “espoused theory” versus “theory in use” developed by Argyris and Schön (1974), who for over twenty years have been concerned with examining conscious and unconscious reasoning processes. The theory is based on the belief that people are designers of action. Action is created by individuals to achieve intended consequences and examine if their actions are effective. Argyris and Schön (1974) suggest that this theory is not simply a case of differences between what people say and what people do. Instead they posit a theory consistent with what people say and a theory consistent with what they do. Espoused theory is formed from our beliefs and experience and is about what we believe and experience. All new information either through experience or intuition (pattern recognition) enters here. Relative to the espoused theory is the theory in use. A theory in use is the “observed theory” as behavior. Even though behavior is not always representative of the espoused theory it still exists. Argyris and Schön are suggesting that an individual is often unaware that her theories in use are not the same as her espoused theories and that people are frequently unaware of their theories in use.

To examine how museums’ docent training practices reflect the educational mission of the museums and the educators’ espoused theory of learning, I collected data at a history museum and an art gallery in the U.S. with active docent programs, both in the midst of training for new exhibits. My analysis focused on identifying processes and activities within the trainings that supported or refuted the museum educators’ espoused theories of learning.

Methods

In this study, the comparative case study method (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000) provides an opportunity for examining the training sessions at these two sites and comparing that practice to the espoused theories of the educator and the museums’ educational philosophy. The cases were the practices of museum educators within the context of docent training in a history museum and an art gallery. For each site, docent training observations, an interview with the museum educator, and a review of documents including training materials and publications identifying the museum’s espoused theory formed the data set.

Findings

Analysis of the two museums’ docent training processes suggest that the learning and educational philosophies maintained by the museums and the museum educators were not reflected in the docent education programs. Instead, each institution exhibited a theory in use that contrasted with their espoused theory. Moreover, the observed theories in use did not reflect the personal espoused theory of the museum educator responsible for the design of the docent training.

Espoused Theories

Analysis of all the data collected indicates that both museum educators’ espoused theory and the educational philosophy of the institutions are based on current research in museum studies and general theories of education. Strategies espoused by the educators for how docents were to engage museum visitors included active inquiry and guided discovery. Moreover, the museums’ promotional materials advertise tours that are active, engaging, and promote learning beyond the museum visit.

The history museum emphasizes education as central to its mission. The website, as well as marketing materials, provides examples of the museum’s espoused theory: “The Museum is

dedicated to teaching in a way that recognizes the worth of all visitors, while providing information about history in a thought provoking manner.” Additionally, the docent recruiting literature notes that becoming a docent is an exciting, rewarding, and integral part of volunteering at the institution. Both of these statements underscore a philosophy of engaging visitors and providing experiences that are exciting and rewarding for both the visitor as well as the docent. When asked what her educational philosophy was, the history museum’s education director said, “As a classroom teacher I believed that students should learn in a variety of ways. My job here is to create educational programs that incorporate a variety of teaching methods to meet the interests and needs of a variety of audiences.” She also emphasized “thinking time,” by stating, “We want our docents to stop talking and let people think. We give visitors a lot of information, and some of it is pretty deep. It’s important for our docents to stop talking and let people take it all in. It’s something we’ve really been working on.” The espoused theory in the materials used to prepare new docents at the history museum was also apparent in the two training programs I observed. During both trainings for newly installed exhibits the museum educator reminded docents at least six times that they should ask questions of the visitors and give people time to think about the installations.

At the art gallery, the materials provided to the public describe the educational philosophy of the institution as one that encourages an appreciation of art through exploration, inquiry, and discovery. The website included the following: “Docent tours add a new dimension to the works in the galleries by offering visitors an engaging experience comprising background information and offering interactive ways of looking at art.” During the interview with the art gallery educator, she said, “We have restructured our training program to sort of fit the museum’s mission and our expansion philosophies to grow our audience and serve lots of people of various backgrounds and interest levels and so forth here at the museum. The shift we see happening in the training program is that rather than focus on feature art history as the model for delivery in the galleries, we focus to look at art appreciation, touring different age groups, dialoguing with the public, using questioning strategies, sort of basic teaching techniques that we’ve used continually in our current program, making that more of a feature and a focus, and then adding in the art history sort of as we go along.”

Additionally, the gallery’s educator emphasized a need for making the art history relevant to the collections. She also spoke in detail about the new emphasis placed on docent use of inquiry-based discussion and guided discovery, “We want them to use methods that help people form their own narratives, promote reflection and discovery, and make people and students excited about the museum and coming back. These are great ways to do that and docents really seem to like them once they get over not lecturing all the time.” These strategies were also espoused during the training sessions of the docents. While a curator led the program, the gallery educator stood by and on one occasion I observed her interjecting into the curator’s lecture, reminding docents not to forget to use inquiry when introducing specific objects and reminding them about the importance of relating the objects to the visitors’ experiences.

Based on the data gathered from both institutions, a set of common characteristics of the espoused theories of the educational philosophy of the museums as well as the museum educators’ theory of learning were identified. Docents are told about the use of interactive strategies such as guided discovery and inquiry, urged to allow visitors to create their own interpretations of exhibits, and valuing the experience and need of the visitor is encouraged. Promotional materials describe how a visitor’s experiences will be enhanced by an “interactive” tour and throughout the materials for novice docent trainings there are strategies offered for how

to engage visitors with exhibits, others, and with the visitor's own ideas. These characteristics are now examined in relation to the observed theory in use for docents at each site.

Theories in Use

The materials provided during new docent orientation at the history museum espoused a theory that stressed engaging visitors with the exhibits through discussion and questioning. In both trainings I observed at the history museum materials distributed for the new exhibits were strictly content based and included detailed descriptions of the objects, articles reviewing the exhibits, and notes from the visiting curator and an artist whose objects were also part of the new exhibit. None of the materials reflected the museum's espoused theory of education by offering docents suggested questions for engaging visitors, techniques for working with groups, or reference to the strategies that were outlined in the novice docent training.

During the course of the first training session at the history museum, I observed 20 docents preparing for eight large installations, 43 objects, and 15 panels of text. In the two-hour training, the curator, a visiting artist, and museum educator lectured to the docents, read labels to 28 of the objects, and referred to the exhibit notebooks. At no point did the trainers do what the museum educator stated in our interview, which was to stop talking and let people think. The rapid-fire delivery moved at a daunting pace and the docents struggled to keep up. At one point I overheard a docent comment to another docent, "Did you get that? I can't write this down fast enough."

The use of inquiry by the museum educator during the first training consisted of the following statement, "If there aren't any questions, we'll move on." This statement was repeated at four different points with no wait time. The museum educator never modeled the practices docents were expected to use in the tours of these new exhibits. At no time were docents asked how the exhibit could be shared with different age groups or how the object could be connected to other parts of the exhibit or to their own experiences or even a visitor's experiences. The presentation did not reflect the espoused theory of the museum educator or the institution's educational philosophy and instead was purely didactic, gave minimal information, and at no time engaged the docents.

The second observation at the history museum involved a smaller exhibit including 20 objects and four panels of text and yielded similar findings. The museum educator lectured to 23 docents about the historical significance of each object and pointed out how the objects related to the museum's permanent exhibit. During the hour-long program docents asked four questions about who had owned the object and the use of the object, but the museum educator asked no questions of the docents. This exhibit, which included toys from earlier time periods, was geared to children and offered an opportunity for docents to relate the objects to modern toys or similar toys that older adults may have owned. At one point a docent commented to the group: "I used to have one just like that. It was my favorite. I played with it all the time until my brother broke it." That was an opportunity for the museum educator to demonstrate her espoused theory, which stressed creating dialogue based on objects and personal experience. Instead, she simply said, "Yes, a lot of these toys might be familiar to you. Now in the case of this next object . . ."

In both training sessions the program fell short of the museum's educational mission of providing information about history in a thought-provoking manner. It did not reflect the educator's espoused theory of museum education, specifically providing think time and encouraging a variety of teaching methods to bolster questions derived from the exhibits. There was a double standard: information and exhibits are presented one-way to docents, and expected to be presented by docents another way.

In the first observation of the art gallery, the docents were receiving training for a new exhibit that included art and furnishings from a specific time period and geographical area of the U.S. The tour was conducted by two curators, as well as the gallery educator, and was approximately four hours in length. Docents received a training manual in advance with an overview of the exhibit and artifacts, sample scripts, label text, and historical information on the time period. The 33 docents were led around and given details about each painting or artifact, as well as any relevant art history and notable details. This information was delivered in a lecture and was in contrast to the statement the gallery educator made in our interview, stating that docents are encouraged not to lecture. Additionally the gallery educator espoused a theory that stressed using engaging teaching methods yet these methods were not put to use in the docent training.

In the second training session 30 gallery docents were previewing an exhibit of Americana on loan from a private collector. At the start of the tour the visiting curator said, "I suggest you look for things in the exhibit that you like and highlight those since you will never be able to cover all the objects in your tours." This statement is ironic because the curator covered all 142 objects during the training session. The art gallery espouses a philosophy that promotes exploration, inquiry, and discovery, but this was not applied to the training of docents. The session consisted of lecture. The educator, for the most part remained silent, letting the visiting curator conduct the training. This resulted in exactly what the gallery educator had hoped her docents would not do; recite an art history lesson that ignored educational strategies and the connection of learning to the knowledge and experience of the visitor.

The educators at both institutions used lecture as the primary method of delivering knowledge necessary for conducting tours. In both cases, the docents were provided descriptions and explanations of objects in the exhibits, and written materials were distributed that docents were to learn on their own. The educators did not develop a dialogue with the docents, nor did they facilitate learning the relationships amongst objects or other installations. Notably missing was the integration of prior personal and museum experiences of the docents during the training. When these observational findings (the theory in use) are compared to the espoused theory of the museum educator, there is a clear discrepancy between the two.

Discussion

This comparative case study has provided a picture of how espoused theories and theories in use operate in the practice of training museum docents. This is illustrated by examining two museums' and the museums' educators' espoused theories against the practices exhibited in four separate training sessions. By doing so, I have been able to identify a paradox between what an educator believes about learning in her institution and what is practiced with docents. Although the educators espoused a method that limits lecture and promotes visitor interaction and inquiry, the theory in use for training docents is just the opposite.

Martinello, Cook, and Wiskemann (1983) suggest that modeling and limiting the number of artifacts examined on a tour is key to preparing docents. Although the espoused theories of both the educators validate these views, the theory in use observed during the docent training ignored modeling in favor of cramming information about all of the objects and installations in the new exhibits into single training sessions. The results are trainings with no substantive discussions, modeling, or practice for the docents. Lecture was the primary means of delivery during these sessions although the espoused theory of both educators rejected lecture, finding it the least desirable method for docents to use with visitors. This is supported by Wolins (1990) who notes that, "although many museum educators admit that the lecture approach often is

undesirable, they continue to invite curators to walk docents through the gallery . . . thereby encouraging docents to emulate the very teaching behaviors they find ineffective with museum visitors” (72). It is crucial for docent training programs to model the espoused theory of the institution. Without training reflective of engaging programs that encourage questioning, interaction, and experimentation, docents will likely continue to lead tours in a manner that mirrors their prior learning experiences in schools and in docent training.

Although museum educators claim to hold education as their central mission (Roberts, 1997), the findings of this study indicate that the mission does not apply equally to all learners. A double standard exists, one for visitors and one for docents. If a museum’s educational goal is to teach visitors how to observe, contrast, classify, deduce, induce, hypothesize, and interpret (Gartenhaus, 1994), how can we expect docents to provide that opportunity if they themselves never see or experience the methods firsthand as learners themselves? Must docents become visitors to gain the same educational experience? This study fosters the hope that museum educators will incorporate their espoused theories and educational philosophy of the institution they represent into the design and delivery of training for docents. It is critical that museum educators take the lead in incorporating their espoused theories into docent training. Regardless of who views an exhibit, whether visitor or docent, the museum educator must act as an advocate for the educational philosophy of the institution.

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