



*Journal of Museum Education* Reader Guide  
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# **“Making the Case for Transforming Training”**

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# MUSEUM EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

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*Journal of Museum Education* Reader Guide

## **“Making the Case for Transforming Training”**

by Jennifer DePrizio

### **Training Program Audit**

In the guest editor introduction, *Making the Case for Transforming Training*, Jennifer DePrizio argues that we need to rethink our training practices for gallery guides. She asks us to align the training we oversee with adults to match with the demands of our changing audiences and evolving educational approaches.

This Reader Guide encourages museum educators to take an inventory of their institution’s current training practices and then place this audit side by side with the program’s aspirations and goals. Every docent or guide program embraces a different mix of traditional and progressive practice; this worksheet asks you to reflect on your own training profile. Taking time to assess what you do now, and to consider what you might do differently will in itself influence your program.

We offer you this **Training Program Audit** to take stock of your tour program and then to analyze/imagine aspects for change. You and your team might want to initially approach this as individuals so that each person thinks through the questions on their own, and then the group can come together to talk about your discoveries. Another approach would be to complete the chart together.

Use the chart on page 2 to guide you through the audit process. When you have completed the audit, reflect on what you have learned using the questions below.

### **Reflection on the Audit**

Generally, in reviewing your audit, what is working with your current tour program and training practices? How do your tour program and training goals align with the structure and approach of your practices? What would you like to change with your tour program? List all aspired changes you defined in this chart and rank them from easiest to most challenging to change. What change would be the most strategic place to start?

### **Reflection on your Role**

How might you facilitate new directions for yourself and make yourself comfortable as a new learner? For example, while you might be comfortable with inquiry-based teaching, are you comfortable asking your audience to do improv games? How might you stretch yourself?

### **Reflection on your Audience**

DePrizio’s phrase “curious companions” offers a generous way to characterize our audiences. How does a curious companion behave on a tour? How do tour guides support this kind of curiosity? What are some strategies to encourage visitors to take on this role?

# Training Program Audit

*The first column identifies the audit area and asks overarching questions for you to consider as you describe your program. Use the second column to make notes about your current practice, and the third column to gather ideas for potential change.*

Audit Area	Current Practice	Aspirational Practice
<b>Value</b> What does good docent/guide practice look like in your institution? What are the most important qualities of the experience and how does it align with your institution's educational mission?		
<b>Public Engagement Practices</b> What methods does your institution use to engage its audiences? Examples: lecture tours, dialogue tours, improv activities, hands-on materials, games and quizzes		
<b>Recruitment</b> Who is on the current touring team, and how do these guides match with the institution's tour needs in terms of skills and diversity of perspectives?		
<b>Training Methods</b> What educational methods do you use for training? What gets most emphasized? Most neglected? Examples: lectures, discussions, practice tours, scenario role play		
<b>Resources</b> How do you allocate your staff time and other resources for training programs considering the audiences that your institution serves?		
<b>Open</b> What other aspect(s) of your program should be addressed?		



FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

## Making the Case for Transforming Training

Jennifer DePrizio

### ABSTRACT

The public value that gallery educators, whether paid or volunteer, add to our institutions is beyond measure. Museums would not be able to serve and educate the public in such broad-reaching ways without the commitment of these educators. However, despite making great strides in improving the quality of teaching for school tours, adult tours remain mainly lecture-based, which jeopardizes opportunities to engage adult visitors in meaningful ways. To change this unsatisfactory system of practice, gallery educator training must transform in two significant ways. Trainees must be thought of first and foremost as adult learners; training must foster a culture of respect that uses adult learning and developmental theory as its foundation. The other change is that museums must invest in training for working with adult audiences with the same level of attention that they pay to training for working with school audiences. If museums are to truly be visitor-centered, they must transform their training to transform the gallery experience for all visitors.

### KEYWORDS

Docent; docent training; gallery educators; adult learning; gallery teaching; adult visitors; learner-centered; public value; relevancy; museums

In 1907, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, introduced the first docents<sup>1</sup> and soon after the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History and others followed suit. These early museum educators were tasked with guiding visitors, fostering appreciation and generating dialogue. The qualities of a “good” docent were described by author Mary Bronson Hartt in 1901:

Awakened appreciation, the opening of eyes—that is the docent’s province. Call him a guide and you miss the point. Any average-witted man can learn to convoy visitors about a museum deafening them with his glib, machine-made patter of names and dates ... But the docent is a bird of another feather. Broadly intelligent, trained to know not only pictures and statues but *people*, versed in the delicate art of imparting not information alone but inspiration—the real docent is born, not made.<sup>2</sup>

While much has changed in museums over the last century, this description of a docent’s core function, “the opening of eyes,” still has resonance today as museums work harder and harder to strengthen relationships with traditional museum visitors, while also attracting and engaging new audiences. Where I take issue with Bronson Hartt is in her assessment that “the real docent is born, not made.” True, some people are naturally more inclined toward and comfortable with the kind of learner-centered gallery experience Bronson Hartt praises and I advocate for as well. But the

best gallery educators<sup>3</sup> are those who have been properly trained and are given continued opportunities for reflection and learning. It is this concept of training that will be explored in the articles that follow. In particular, I want to focus the discussion of gallery educator training on adult audiences. For me, and the authors in this guest-edited section, there are two overarching themes to explore—considering gallery educators not just future teachers but as adult learners, and advocating for equal attention given to training for adult visitors as we do for K-12 audiences. Attention to each of these training issues will result in gallery educators who are equipped with the confidence and tools to engage adult visitors in appealing in-gallery learning experiences.

To properly advocate for a transformation in our approach to training gallery educators, we must first consider the landscape of adult visitors to museums. Many of today's museum-goers are savvy cultural consumers who expect to benefit from the museum's expertise while also being actively engaged and given the freedom to choose and organize their own experience. Today's museum educators discuss and debate what we can do differently to attract more people to come through our doors and what the best approaches are to engage them. This is not a new quandary. In fact, museum researcher Marilyn Hood's seminal visitor study piece "Staying Away: why people chose not to visit museums," took up this issue over 30 years ago. Hood concludes that it all comes down to choice and how well a leisure activity may or may not satisfy one's expectations. The attributes that impact an adult's decision include: "being with people, or social interaction; doing something worthwhile; feeling comfortable and at ease in one's surrounding; having a challenge of new experiences; having an opportunity to learn; participating actively."<sup>4</sup> Yet, after three decades, the majority of in-gallery learning experiences for adult visitors still do not reflect these qualities. Most adult tours and gallery talks are lecture-based, leaving little room for the kind of welcoming, social, participatory experiences Hood describes. The immense popularity of commercial tour experiences like those offered by Museum Hack<sup>5</sup> paired with the fact that museums and historic sites have seen significant decline in visitation over the last decade<sup>6</sup> suggests a critical reality—visitors want a different kind of museum experience than is currently being offered in most institutions. Despite knowing this to be true, we have not seen a significant transformation in adult museum tours. I believe that our system of training gallery educators and museum culture in general is the stumbling block.

What we should strive for are gallery experiences that empower visitors to draw on prior knowledge and experiences, while also benefitting from the expertise and perspective of the gallery educator to arrive at a multifaceted understanding of the objects in our collection. Adults value direct participation, but also desire insight into knowledge. In her recent essay, "Whose Questions, Whose Conversation?" museum professional Kathleen McLean explains:

At the same time that visitors expect to engage more actively in their museum experiences, they also expect and want to hear from museum experts. Visitors want to know what the experts think, why experts value some ideas or objects over others, and how experts can help them make meaning and find significance in the world around them (or at least in the museum). But visitors are not just interested in *monologues*. This means that museum experts need to learn how to *listen* and *respond*, share the inquiry process, and change perspectives as new ideas emerge.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, we have a responsibility to share our experience and expertise, but we must also leave space for active participation and control of one's own learning. Instead of thinking of our visitors as empty vessels into which we pour our content, we can think of them as curious companions. The information that we share is the beginning of a dialogue, not an end point. It should encourage visitors to look closely, think deeply and process the visual information through their own unique lens. The tension between being visitor-centered and delivering content is a false one. Sharing the immense knowledge about our collections is not in jeopardy in this age of audience engagement. If done correctly, the public's interest in our collections will naturally increase.

A major factor in fostering a natural curiosity is engaging visitors in our galleries in ways that are developmentally appropriate and support their interests and preferences. The key to this is training. Training gallery educators to facilitate this kind of open-ended, yet informative gallery experience requires a significant shift in how we think about trainees, how we structure training and what ongoing opportunities we provide for continued growth of gallery educators. It has been 30 years since Alison L. Grinder and E. Sue McCoy wrote *The Good Guide: A Sourcebook for Interpreters, Docents and Tour Guides*.<sup>8</sup> A remarkable work at the time, it brought together ideas about learning and developmental theory, audience needs, and teaching strategies and it has remained the go-to resource of most museum educators. However, since the mid-1980s, our collective understanding of gallery teaching and audiences has expanded. We have a responsibility to continue the discussion about best practices in gallery educator training in a rigorous way and I hope this guest-edited JME issue pushes that dialogue to the forefront of our conversations across the field.

Gallery educators, whether volunteer or paid, are the public face of our institutions and are given the immense responsibility of fulfilling our museum's mission to engage and educate our visitors. We cannot expect these teachers to carry out high-quality teaching unless we develop a transparent training system which shifts the structure from a content-driven agenda to a new model that considers the docent as an adult learner, not solely a future teacher. Furthermore, content must be taught in more engaging, non-authoritative ways, while also building communication and teaching skills.

The traditional structure for gallery educator training involves lectures by curators and other scholars with additional sessions on pedagogy or teaching techniques. Gallery educators are then expected to translate the expert knowledge into an engaging experience for visitors. Unfortunately, this system is not working. Most tours for adult visitors are still lackluster lectures leaving little room for visitors to play an active role in their learning. While we are seeing improvements in gallery teaching with students (due to increased training on theory and pedagogy), we are not seeing the same consideration for adult audiences. To achieve our collective desire to encourage adult visitors to have deep, meaningful connection with our collections, we must transform the traditional training model.

What if our training methods reflected the kind of teaching we expect gallery educators to employ? Imagine a training program in which the trainee is at the center of the experience as both future gallery educator and adult learner.<sup>9</sup> The structure and activities would acknowledge that each trainee comes with a wide variety of expectations, motivations and prior knowledge, just as visitors do. In this scenario, the museum educator, curator or content specialist would be the facilitator of training, but not the authority. He or she

would act as a guide, aiding each gallery educator to a place of discovery—teacher and student would be companions in learning. Trainees would have the opportunity to take leadership roles, both as active and reflective participants, and at times as facilitators. The course structure and facilitation methods would address and adapt throughout making room for questions as they develop; topics could be re-prioritized mid-stream to better meet the needs of the trainees. This model would reflect the kind of flexible and responsive gallery teaching we want the trainees to engage in. It would consciously apply adult learning theory to the planning, while introducing activities that focus on flexibility and opportunities for risk taking. In this way, the enthusiasm, expertise and teaching skills of each gallery educator could be respected, celebrated and considered an integral part of the learning process. This would be a truly learner-centered approach with the potential to shift that needle toward more engaging in-gallery learning experiences for adults.

The following case study describes an experimental docent training program that attempted to follow an adult learner-centered approach.

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### **Case study: Docent Remix at the Portland Art Museum (Portland, Oregon)**

*By Sarah Lampen, Docent and Tour Programs Coordinator and Amy Gray, Manager of Community and Tour Programs, Portland (OR) Art Museum<sup>10</sup>*

The Portland Art Museum has been exploring new forms of public engagement that create compelling audience experiences and build stronger ties to Portland communities. As part of this, the Education Department has been re-envisioning the role of the docent. In 2014, staff took the opportunity to rethink recruitment, training, and how docents might build their own set of in-gallery experiences outside of the traditional tour model. This experiment was called “Docent Remix.”

#### **Remixing recruitment**

One of the museum’s initial goals with “Docent Remix” was to recruit individuals who would add greater diversity to the existing Docent Council.<sup>11</sup> By holding the trainings on Wednesday evenings, barriers were removed for those unable to participate in previous trainings scheduled during the work day. Local nonprofits that connect teaching artists with the community helped to distribute the call for applications to their networks. In an effort to reach young professionals and artists, the new training class was advertised to the Emerging Arts Leaders group in Portland, and social media created an online presence.

The museum selected 11 new recruits, and invited a handful of current docents and staff from across the institution (such as Membership, Security, the Director’s Office, Development and Guest Services) to join the weekly training classes. By training docents and staff together to interact with the public in new and collaborative ways, the institution challenged itself to do what it has been asking of visitors for years: to rethink the types of experiences that can happen in a museum. Coming together as a team framed the museum as a lively community space. Training activities experimented in the galleries in some unexpected ways—changing perspective by lying on the ground to discuss an installation overhead, participating in guided improv exercises, and by diving into complex issues via structured dialogue resembling the format of popular games and quizzes. Staff succeeded in building a strong, dynamic team and graduated 10 flexible, creative and confident docents after 38 weeks of training.



## **Remixing training**

The format of the training class differed from that of previous years, shifting from a focus on art and object history to creative public-engagement strategies. The experimental approach encouraged co-creation of content and allowed the group members to drive the training. Experienced docents were invited to lead portions of the training to support the week's theme such as looking, listening, questions and reflection. Participants gained a background in pedagogy by studying philosophers such as John Dewey, as well as a grounding in current museum teaching philosophy and practice through the study of John Falk and Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee's writings, among others.<sup>12</sup> The Portland Art Museum's curators helped trainees to develop familiarity with the collection, and identify connections between objects and the Portland community.

In addition, the new training model paired staff members from across departments and docents in order to facilitate more effective communication between the institution and front-line volunteers. Staff members de-mystified the inner workings of the institution and built a foundation of transparency by explaining the work that they do. For their part, docents have valuable insight into visitors' needs and interests, and the collaborative format of the curriculum allowed the Portland Art Museum's staff to better understand our audience. Trust was instrumental to the success of this model. Each member of the group exhibited mutual respect and fostered a sense of equality, which allowed the group to learn and grow together.

## **Remixing the museum**

The collaborative and experimental format of the training curriculum has had a lasting impact on the way staff and docents develop effective and relevant programming for present and future audiences. Now more nimble and responsive, staff and docents seek out opportunities to share authorship with others. Internal communication is improving every day as staff focus on commonalities when approaching visitor-centered goals. As with any new adventure, not everything went according to plan; some experiments failed, providing an opportunity to learn. Ultimately, the freedom to play with an established tradition has meant change throughout the entire institution. By re-envisioning the training model, docents and staff have learned that change is not always as scary as anticipated. In some instances, the excitement generated can sustain both and invigorate them in their work.

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By breaking away from the traditional docent training model, the Docent Remix program at the Portland Art Museum provides an example of the ways in which museums can transform the in-gallery learning experiences for adult visitors.

In this guest-edited section of JME, five museum educators with extensive experience with gallery teaching and working with both paid and volunteer gallery educators expand on the issues outlined above from their unique perspective. Kimberly McCray blends her direct experience leading gallery educator training in her role as Adult Programs Coordinator at Shelburne Museum with her work as a doctoral student at Lesley University to make the case for the integration of adult learning theory into the design and delivery of training and professional development for front-line museum educators. Advocating for a model of shared leadership as a way to impact the quality of gallery teaching, Rachel Stark, Assistant Director of Education at the Skirball Cultural Center, shares lessons learned from the evolution of the Skirball's docent program. Then Rob Carr, Exhibits and Interpretive Programs Manager, explores The Wild Center's



interpretive training program to answer the question—how can the customization of a national training program improve the visitor experience? In “Improvising Your Teaching Skills,” Jen Oleniczak, Founder and Artistic Director of The Engaging Educator, encourages the use of improv education as a unique methodology to train gallery educators to communicate and connect with visitors in a more meaningful ways. Finally, Kabir Singh, an experienced gallery educator, reflects on his transition from teaching K-12 audiences to working with adult visitors, highlighting how he applied previously learned skills to adults whose motivations and expectations differ greatly from students.

The public value that gallery educators add to our institutions is beyond measure. We would not be able to serve and educate the public in such broad-reaching ways without the commitment they make to our museums. To be strong twenty-first-century institutions that are relevant and valuable within our communities, we must increase our attention to the gallery learning experiences that we offer to our adult visitors and invest the time and resources to implement new and expanded learning opportunities. Truly strengthening both the quality of gallery teaching for adult audiences, as well as the professionalism of one’s docent corps requires deep investigation and transformation of training methodologies. This is at the heart of what we will explore in this issue.

## Notes

1. For a review of the early history of docentry in art museums, see Giltinan, “The Early History of Docents in American Art Museums: 1890–1930,” .
2. Bronson Hartt, “Docentry: A New Profession,” 703.
3. To be inclusive of all the various structures of teaching staff (docent, guide, interpreter, teacher, etc.) in museums, historic sites, etc., I will use the term “gallery educator.”
4. Hood, “Staying Away: Why People Choose not to Visit Museums,” 51.
5. Museum Hack is a for-profit company that offers tours in museums in New York City, Washington, DC and San Francisco. While anyone can purchase tickets for their tours, their target audience is Millennials, identified roughly as 20–35-year-olds. Museum Hack describes what they offer as “highly interactive, subversive, fun, non-traditional museum tour.” [https:// museumhack.com](https://museumhack.com) (accessed 15 September 2015).
6. For detailed report of this decline, see National Endowment for the Arts, “A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002–12,” January 2015, <http://arts.gov/publications/decade-arts-engagement-findings-survey-public-participation-arts-2002-2012> (accessed 10 September 2015).
7. McLean, “Whose Questions, Whose Conversation?,” 77.
8. Grinder and McCoy, *The Good Guide: A Sourcebook for Interpreters, Docents, and Tour Guides*.
9. For a case study exploring this kind of training approach, see Grenier, “Practicing What We Preach: A Case Study of Two Training Programs.”
10. Thank you to Mike Murawski, Director of Education at the Portland (OR) Art Museum, for helping to continue the dialogue about issues of gallery teaching and docent training.
11. The full docent body at the Portland Art Museum is referred to as the Docent Council.
12. Burnham and Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. Dewey, *Art as Experience*. Falk, “Understanding Museum Visitors’ Motivation and Learning,” accessed 20 September 2015, [http://kulturstyrelsen.dk/fileadmin/user\\_upload/dokumenter/KS/institutioner/museer/Museumsdrift/museums.pdf](http://kulturstyrelsen.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumenter/KS/institutioner/museer/Museumsdrift/museums.pdf).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## About the author

**Jennifer DePrizio** is the Director of Learning and Interpretation at the Portland Museum of Art (ME). For the last 15 years, she has dedicated much of her professional energy to improving the visitor experience by reframing traditional docent training. Prior to the PMA, Jenn has held positions at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Worcester Art Museum, and the Vermont Historical Society. She has a B.A. in art history from the College of the Holy Cross and a M.A.T. in Museum Education from George Washington University.

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