

*Journal of Museum Education*

# READER GUIDE

Volume 16, 2018

# Creating Safe(r) Spaces for Visitors and Staff in Museum Programs

Mark Katrikh

Reader Guide by:  
Susan Spero & Lynn Baum

With contributions by:  
Brooke DiGiovanni Evans, Emily Potter-Ndiaye & Carole Krucoff  
of the MER Editorial Team & Linda Blanshay & Mark Katrikh of the  
Museum of Tolerance

## ***Creating Safe(r) Spaces for Visitors and Staff in Museum Programs***

by Mark Katrikh

In *Creating Safe(r) Spaces for Visitors and Staff in Museum Programs*, Katrikh, provides insights on the “five layers of taking care” developed for the Museum of Tolerance. Each layer represents a constituent considered in the process of gallery-based dialogue. This framework demonstrates the recognition that inviting challenging conversations takes thoughtful facilitation and support for all of these dimensions in order to create the necessary environments for open, responsible, and respectful conversation. These layers also provide a guide to thinking about the reach of these conversations from the individual to the communities beyond the museum.

You can [access the article online](#) through our publishing partner  
Taylor & Francis’s *Journal of Museum Education* web page.

In thinking about extending this model to our own work, this Reader Guide asks you—the museum educator, guide, or manager—to explore the skills and kinds of supports you need to/want to have in place to engage visitors in challenging and potentially emotionally-charged conversations. The constituent-focused layers presented in the article provide a lens for identifying questions and strategies to support these conversations at every level, from the museum educator (*guide*) and visitor (*questioner*) one-on-one, to the tour/program group as a whole, then to the museum and ultimately to the larger communities outside the walls of the museum. The last two layers address the museum’s institutional values in supporting these conversations, and reflect the goal to have a greater impact in the world. All of these layers contribute to the museum’s position on engaging visitors with complex content, and ask us how we want to “take care” that the conversations we engage with the public are thoughtful for all involved.

Before diving into the questions asked about each of the five layers, we encourage you to have an initial discussion about how your department has managed controversial and challenging conversations that often arise in programs and exhibitions.

*(continued)*

## **The Five Layers of Taking Care**

***Guide: We honor our own dignity and identity and support our needs to be treated respectfully at all times***

- What skill-sets do you think your Guides (public facing facilitators) need to better manage controversy and hold responsible conversations in the galleries?
- In what ways, if any, does your museum provide support to your Guides to have the skills and courage to engage visitors in complex discussions? Is there ongoing training? Are there defined lines of support for issues that may arise?
- The article offers ideas on facilitation skills for managing controversial conversations. Which of these and other skills would you and your colleagues want to develop to be able to listen to our visitor comments with questions and compassion?

***Questioner: We acknowledge the courage of the visitor to speak and we listen to their opinions with questions and compassion***

- How can your Guides encourage visitors to have the courage to speak and acknowledge their voices?
- How can the museum Guide help create "safe and brave spaces" both physically and/or psychologically that will help increase the visitor's willingness to participate in complex discussions?
- How can Guides maintain compassionate questioning even if they as individuals disagree with or are triggered by what the visitor says?

***Group: We consider the impact of every statement on group members and seek to redress possible harms or balance perspective***

- What are the rules for discussion, both internally and with the public, that your institution either uses or might put in place, in order to create a safe place for controversial comments?
- What are some strategies that your Guides can use to support interaction between visitors when the conversation gets tense or conflicted: how can you honor differing opinions?

***Museum: We uphold the values of this Museum and elevate free speech by addressing irresponsible or offensive speech.***

- Is there anything in your museum mission or department policy that supports your team and institution in welcoming dialogue on a controversial topic? How are you supported? If not, how could you start this conversation?

*(continued)*

- How and where does your institutional voice or perspective intersect with controversial topics (for instance, related to history, science, art)? If there are not any specific positions, has your institution ever had a particular event or instance where controversy has arisen?
- Are these positions widely shared and discussed internally so that everyone understands the museum's point of view on the controversial topics involved?

***World: We promote policies and practices that honor diversity, inclusion, equity and justice beyond these walls — for all people.***

- In this World layer The Museum of Tolerance takes a clear stance about social justice issues that align with their museum. In what ways does your museum take stances on complex issues that take place in the wider world and with the museum's communities?
- What resources or individuals could you reach out to in your community to help with training staff on these conversations?