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Cultivating Shared Leadership with Docents and Staff

Rachel Stark

ABSTRACT

Be they paid or volunteer docents, teaching staff members play an essential role in fulfilling a museum's mission. Yet the experiences that visitors have on docent tours – despite all of the time expended on docent training – are not often as powerful or meaningful as they could be. Knowing this, how can we support and empower docents as adult learners to consistently create high-quality learning experiences for visitors? How can we ensure that the teaching staff feel invested in our institutions? One way to create and sustain better teaching is to approach teaching staff as collaborators and peers, adopting a model of shared leadership. Just as great teaching requires flexibility, adaptation, and a willingness to experiment, so too does creating a culture of shared leadership for adult learners.

KEYWORDS

Adult learners; docents; museums; gallery educators; training; teaching; learning; school tours; shared authority

With the visitor experience at the center of our work as museum educators, many of us have the daunting task of supporting and managing a large teaching staff with a variety of interests and expectations. Whether these adult learners are retired professionals now serving as docents or paid gallery educators with diverse expertise in museum education, early childhood education, performing arts experience or more, we want them all to facilitate consistent high-quality gallery experiences. To achieve this standard, training programs often utilize the traditional top-down model (a traditional classroom model) with museum educators acting as “teachers” and docents as “students.” However, this method for training and supervising teaching staff is problematic. It is often inefficient and can be demoralizing for docents, supporting an us/them, expert/novice binary culture. And perhaps most important, this model can be ineffective, yielding visitor experiences that are often passive and reflective of the top-down style of teaching that mirrors the traditional mode of training docents themselves.¹

One solution to this problem is to institute a model of shared authority that shifts the burden of responsibility from a “docent trainer” to the entire team. For the last few years at the Skirball Cultural Center, in Los Angeles, California, we have been experimenting with a model of shared leadership that is built primarily around relationship building and reflective practice. What we have come to understand through a process of trial and error is that docents must have a role in developing program goals; we must then hold them accountable to these goals and work collaboratively to deliver the best possible visitor experience. In this way, it is possible to align the kind of teaching we want to see

in the galleries with the kind of training experiences we offer docents as adult learners. Just as great teaching requires flexibility, adaptation, and a willingness to experiment, so too does creating a culture of shared leadership.

Why shared leadership is right for museum teaching staff

What is shared leadership? Some call it co-expertise, others call it shared authority. Whatever term you use, in the museum teaching context it means creating and sustaining better teaching by approaching teaching staff as collaborators and peers. One of the best ways to think about shared leadership and its relevance to training docents comes from a book about business practice called *Power Up: Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership*.² This book and an article by Margaret Wheatley and Debbie Frieze about effective management techniques reference a post-heroic leadership model that shifts the metaphor from *hero* to *host*.³

For the hero model, picture this: Wonder Woman furiously observing multiple museum tours each day, singlehandedly taking on the training of hundreds of people, moving mountains with the endless amount of coaching hours she puts in. She is not exhausted, she is Wonder Woman! But, yes, in fact, she is exhausted. And not only that, she is frustrated because the sheer amount of work and intensity is unsustainable for one person, a.k.a. the docent/staff “trainer.” Furthermore, this model renders everyone else powerless. They must wait for her to come in and save the day.⁴ The other alternative is the host (think of someone you know with excellent social skills): There she is, moving with ease from group to group engaging people in different topics of conversation and checking to ensure that everyone is enjoying him or herself. See how the host delegates responsibilities, brings the right people together, and trusts that people will get up or ask for what they need. She is attentive, she is graceful, she is the host!

Many of us behave as heroes, leading the charge on teaching and learning in our institutions, struggling to direct our teaching staff toward achieving shared goals. We have limited time and resources but power through nonetheless because we are committed and sure of how we want teaching to look and feel. Unfortunately, this top-down model does not really make sense in museum education departments, which are often understaffed and overcommitted. But these same staff members are dedicated to making sure that visitors have meaningful experiences. Switching to the host model redistributes the work load and makes use of neglected resources. There are driven and knowledgeable museum teachers in our midst that are also invested in creating dynamic, participatory experiences for visitors. It is time to invite these adult learners in, form a shared leadership team, and let them shine. At the Skirball Cultural Center, an institution dedicated to engaging people with one another and the larger community, this shift toward a shared leadership model was a natural fit. The Skirball is a place that envisions collaboration as a key to improving society, so it is fitting that our gallery teaching cohort learns together, teaches together, and reflects together.⁵

Creating the right conditions

As authors David Bradford and Allen Cohen suggest in *Power Up*, shared leadership begins with setting the conditions and good group processes for healthy, productive

working relationships. The authors identify the following components as being essential to building a culture of shared leadership:

- (1) “Develop a mature, cohesive **shared-responsibility team**” – this team can be made up of any number of people including paid staff and volunteer docents.⁶ Encourage the team to hold each other accountable to one another and to their audience (museum visitors). Set a tone of collegiality, which coupled with clear and consistent communication, can build trust and empower people to do great work together.
- (2) “Articulate a **tangible vision** and commit to it” – as a team, review the institution’s mission statement and then work collaboratively to identify aspirational goals related to gallery teaching.⁷ That is your vision statement! Shout it from the rooftops! This vision should be clear, direct, and measurable to some degree.
- (3) Encourage “**mutual influence**” – create opportunities for people to work together, exchange ideas, learn from each other’s strengths, as well as check each other when needed.⁸ This means keeping each other on track, being honest when something is not working well, and finding positive solutions.

At the Skirball, the teaching staff and I have worked to establish and nurture a model of shared leadership by utilizing some of the conditions described above as well as those of our own invention. Here are some strategies that we have adopted, some with a greater degree of success than others, but all in the interest of enhancing the quality of experience for adult learners and visitors.⁹

Set clear expectations through shared goals

Establish shared goals – create them together, refine them, edit them, and make it clear how that vision is realized in actual instruction.¹⁰ Although this seems simple it is actually the hardest part – getting the entire team to agree on that tangible vision and how best to realize it is complex and time-consuming. At the Skirball, docents and staff worked together in a professional learning community for several months to craft gallery teaching goals. At select docent classes and staff meetings, time was dedicated to crafting the statement together and identifying what we have called “pillars of teaching,” meaning the components that are essential for great teaching at the Skirball. Those pillars include (1) *content*, essentially the “what” of tours, (2) *facilitation*, meaning “how” the content is shared and the experience that visitors will have, and (3) *co-teaching*, the “who” of teaching and a style of partner teaching that is employed at the Skirball. At the end of the process, docents were better able to articulate for themselves what a high-quality teaching experience looks and feels like. The goals had substance and were tied to measurable outcomes. Ultimately, the team felt invested in achieving these teaching goals since it had a hand in creating them. Team members were not being told what to do and how to do it; they had determined this for themselves.

Establish dedicated time and space for people to work together

One way to encourage teaching staff to build a deeper sense of shared responsibility toward gallery teaching goals is to build in opportunities for people to be together. At the Skirball, the education staff established a system for reflection about its teaching

practice that includes one-on-one conversations, group discussion, and written evaluations. Here are some examples:

Prior to each tour, as they wait for groups to arrive, docents spend ten to fifteen minutes together reviewing tour objectives and sharing teaching strategies. This is an informal opportunity to talk about what they are teaching, how they intend to teach together, and what is best for students and teachers given the range of learning styles and developmental needs. Including a few minutes of planning time before each tour ensures that gallery educators are getting along and staying attuned to the teaching goals.

After each tour, docents gather in a break room for 5 to 10 minutes and collaborate on a written reflection. This dedicated post-tour time, generates vibrant discussion as people debrief about the tour, at times strategizing about solutions to group management or how best to address difficult tour content. The written feedback is collected and at times used to give feedback to the tour group. This is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of reflective practice strategies that can be employed to keep people connected to one another and working toward the same goals.

Support opportunities for mixing and mingling

Incidentally, the teaching staff also uses the dedicated pre- and post-tour time as well as regular docent classes and special events to share family stories, recipes, and laugh together about travel, kids, grandkids, and more. This is one of the great benefits of having an energized, gregarious, and passionate volunteer teaching staff! On the surface, it may seem like kibbitzing, but the personal relationships that are formed in these moments can make docents more committed to one another, the institution, and its programming, thus dedicated to perform better.

Hold the teaching staff accountable to the goals

Managing docents means being willing to have difficult conversations about performance. No one likes to be told she is not doing a good job. But establishing the tools with which to give and receive honest feedback can make those conversations easier. When working with new docents or coaching veterans, use a rubric that both parties design together to give regular feedback. The rubric should provide clearly articulated desired outcomes; at the Skirball they are related specifically to the “pillars of teaching” – the content of the tour, the types of facilitation, and the degree of co-teaching that occurred. By having a format with which to give and share feedback, supervisors can encourage open dialogue with docents about all aspects of their teaching. It is also not enough to just give a docent a few verbal notes after watching them teach a section of a tour, or to pass on visitors’ comments without discussion. Try to follow-up in-person conversations with an email of main points. Take the time to get it in writing so people can reference areas of success and areas of growth. This will hold everyone accountable to shared goals.¹¹

Create opportunities for peer learning

Peer learning is an essential component of shared leadership. When docents have regular opportunities to observe and practice teach with one another, they build confidence and

gain skills. One way to create opportunities for peer learning is to organize “learning walks.”¹²

Learning walks are a data collection method in which docents act as researchers, looking for evidence of specific learning characteristics such as positive peer-to-peer interaction, student engagement, adult engagement, and so on. Docents walk from tour to tour, observing different sections and taking notes on what they see and hear. This evidence-based approach provides an opportunity to experience varied teaching styles and observe how various techniques impact learners. This is not about judging the quality of teaching in an evaluative way, but rather looking for evidence of the aspects of engagement and interactivity that are built into the learning objectives. It is also an opportunity to focus objectively on the visitor experience. At the end of the learning walk, the “researchers” (aka docents) gather together to debrief and share findings, which are then compiled into a larger summary and shared with all of the teaching staff. It is a labor-intensive process, but the time and energy are worth it as the experience allows for clarity about the visitor experience. Docents are always so appreciative for this time to observe one another teach, picking up tips and tricks along the way that enhance their own teaching.

Work as a team

At the Skirball, we have the great fortune of utilizing a co-teaching model in which docents and gallery educators teach together daily. Although not all institutions can do this, integrating staff and volunteer docents has significantly impacted the quality of teaching and built the team’s morale. This model allows us to literally see ourselves as a team of teachers and has the added benefit of making docents and gallery educators even more invested in one another. When gallery educators and docents are working together day in and day out, and have a platform for giving and receiving feedback, they have greater confidence in their abilities which translates to a greater commitment to one another and higher quality experiences for visitors. Whether in conversation in the morning before tours, after tours, or via phone or email, the teaching team is involved with one another on a consistent basis, and can reference teaching experiences had together as well as life events. These opportunities to reflect, teach, and learn together builds a supportive network that is rooted in a culture of respect and care.

Share the love

There is no better way to build a deeper sense of ownership and commitment, than making docents feel valued. While some positive reinforcement may seem like a small thing, giving docents feedback in the form of students’ handwritten thank you notes, drawings, and survey responses from teachers and chaperones is essential. Letting them know that their work is appreciated by visitors can bolster their confidence and pride, leading to stronger performance. This can be done in a weekly or monthly email (at the Skirball we send a weekly email called the “docent dispatch”), at an end-of-year event, or simply by posting a letter on an office wall. Although sharing this kind of feedback can be time-consuming, it is an important way of staying in a regular communication loop with the teaching staff.

Conclusion

These are some of the ways that my team and I have sought to build a healthy and successful group of adult learners that work together toward shared teaching goals. Thinking of teaching staff, both volunteer and paid, as a collaborative team can make everyone feel encouraged, respected, and empowered. There have been some successes and failures in this process, for sure. However, the shift from a hero to host model cultivates a culture of care and respect that leads to better teaching overall. When the museum educator who has previously acted as the “hero” lets go and becomes a “host,” the teaching staff will share the load. This process takes time, and an investment on the part of docents, but adopting these practices can lead to more productive working relationships with the museum’s docents, a special group of adult learners. It can improve the group’s morale and allow the team to be even more invested in the institution. Together, we can build shared leadership around teaching and learning.

Notes

1. For the sake of simplicity, the term “docent” will be used throughout this article to reference full-time staff, part-time gallery educators, volunteer docents and all of the other terms we may use for museum teachers.
2. Bradford and Cohen, *Power Up*.
3. Wheatley and Frieze, “Leadership in the Age of Complexity.”
4. Rasmussen, “Leading Together.”
5. The mission of the Skirball Cultural Center is to explore the connections between 4000 years of Jewish heritage and the vitality of American democratic ideals. We welcome and seek to inspire people of every ethnic and cultural identity in American life. Guided by our respective memories and experiences, together we aim to build a society in which all of us can feel at home.
6. Bradford and Cohen, *Power Up*, 52.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Special thanks to the remarkable Education Department at the Skirball Cultural Center led by Sheri Bernstein, Vice President and Director of Education and Jason Porter, former Associate Director of Education who provided the supportive conditions to experiment with programs and create consistent, high-quality experiences for our visitors. Many thanks to my colleagues who have worked hard to create and implement this shared leadership model for teaching staff including Susan Larson, Anna Schwarz, Sara Stevens, Davida Persaud, Rosalie Tucker, Adele Lander Burke, Jenny Gillett, and Helen Alonzo. My appreciation extends to our remarkable Skirball docents and Gallery Educators who are always willing to dive into creative and challenging conversations as well as to wonderful peers, particularly Briley Rasmussen, who provided inspiration and support around working towards a shared leadership model.
10. Green and Hauser, *Managing to Change the World*.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Fisher and Frey, *Principal Leadership*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

About the author

Rachel Stark, Assistant Director of Education at the Skirball Cultural Center, oversees school, teacher, and family programs. She holds a MS Ed in Leadership in Museum Education from Bank Street College of Education. Stark has served on the board of the Museum Educators of Southern California and presented at AAM and NAEA about dynamic approaches to working with adult learners.

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