

Engaging Today's Audience Through Engaging Docents: Case Study of Orange County Museum of Art's Docent Program



Presented at the California Association of Museums Conference
February 15-17, 2012 | Berkeley, CA

AUTHOR: Kaileena Flores-Emnace, CAM Fellow

The museum visitor is changing and museum education programs are finding new ways to adapt. Some programs are shifting towards discussion-based gallery experiences to meet the needs of the new museum visitors, which presents a challenging change from the lecture style tours historically provided by museum volunteer docents. Jenni Stenson, School and Tour Programs Manager for the Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA) explained how OCMA has made such a shift at the 2012 CAM Annual Conference session titled "Training Docents to Lose Control." Stenson offered descriptions of the recently reconstructed docent program at OCMA and successful strategies of engagement and modeling of dialogued-based touring to prepare docents for today's changing museum visitor.

In contrast to other sessions offered at the conference, Stenson's presentation consisted primarily of small group discussions. Participants were divided into groups and given paper coffee sleeves to investigate quietly by themselves. After a few moments, the presenters/group facilitators started the discussion by asking, "What did you notice about this object?" In Stenson's group, the discussion flowed organically from culture to production to the meaning of symbols found on the paper sleeve. The group was surprised to have found so many fascinating points of interest in a mundane object. After asking the group what they noticed about her facilitation, the group pointed out that Stenson allowed the participants to guide the conversation. The session activity engaged groups in an open-inquiry discussion to model not only the values of dialogue-based tours facilitated at OCMA, but also to model the way in which OCMA now trains its docents to lead tours based on the thoughts of the visitors, not solely art history facts.

The impetus for OCMA's restructuring of their docent program was Stenson's desire to shift the gallery experience for visitors to dialogue-based tours and to address the low retention rate of docent volunteers. The year before the restructuring process began only one out of 15 trainees had graduated the docent-training program. This was an indicator that there was room for improvement and showed a lack of return on staff resources. Before embarking on a new training program focused on dialogue-based gallery experiences, OCMA first gathered data to help understand the high docent turnover rate. The research was conducted in three parts: (1) surveying similar institutions on their docent programs, (2) identifying the completion of volunteer opportunities at nearby institutions, and, (3) a survey of OCMA's docents.

The key findings were also organized in three parts: recruitment, training and retention, which led OCMA to revise its strategies in those three aspects. The data provided evidence that person-to-person contact is the most effective approach to recruiting new docents. For this reason, docents share information on becoming a docent at the end of every public tour. OCMA also posts information in public places, such as all of the Orange County public libraries, and performs community outreach. These new recruitment methods resulted in a more diverse group of volunteer docents. OCMA docents include professionals in education, business, law, architecture and medicine, and their ages range from 20-60, including a mother-daughter docent team.

Engaging Today's Audience Through Engaging Docents: Case Study of Orange County Museum of Art's Docent Program

Changes to the training program start at the interview process. Research indicated that docents were not completing training because they were unaware of the time commitment and responsibilities the program entails. The application now includes the training schedule, which is also communicated at the interview to ensure an understanding of what they are agreeing to from the beginning. Prior to these changes, the acceptance rate of applicants was 100%. After identifying the key traits of quality active docents, the acceptance process became more rigorous and selective to reflect those key traits.

Stenson wished to revise the training to foster meaningful dialogue-based gallery experiences for visitors; the survey findings were helpful in shifting tours in that direction as well as addressing the poor retention rate. The findings revealed that 67% of trainees complete training programs at other museums, but only 50% complete the training at OCMA. The former training program was split into two semesters, the first focused on art history and the second covered touring techniques. Little group management information was provided and the sessions felt redundant to trainees. Having the "fun stuff" in the first half of training left little reason for trainees to continue. However, the survey found that the most useful aspect of docent training was about touring techniques and spending time in the gallery practicing and observing tours.

In response, Stenson worked closely with the Docent Council to implement a new training program that integrated art history and touring practice. Stenson worked closely with the Docent Council Training Co-Chairs, who presented with her at the CAM annual conference, Lynda Wilson and Jeanne Johnson. Both career educators, Wilson has been volunteering at OCMA since 1996 and Johnson since 2000. In efforts to make meaningful and lasting changes in the training program, the three spent many hours discussing the research findings and changes needed. Together, they implemented not simply a new training and docent program, but a "process" of learning that reflects the idea of gallery teaching as a learning practice.

OCMA's docent training begins in the galleries. By wasting no time outside of the space they will work in, new trainees experience what it is like to talk about art in the galleries from the start. Similar to the experience Stenson, Wilson and Johnson provided CAM conference participants in their session, trainees begin learning dialogue-based touring skills through participation in a facilitated discussion. This is a key strategy for OCMA's training program, as it builds a safe place for experimentation in gallery teaching. The foundation for dialogue-based gallery experiences is the use of open-ended inquiry. Open-ended questions make space for anything to happen, and the facilitator must cede control to leave room for the thoughts of visitors.

Throughout OCMA's training program the staff models the risk-taking involved in dialogue-based touring in hopes that the trainees will feel comfortable enough to take risks themselves. Stenson believes in a trickle-down effect in that when staff opens themselves up to vulnerability in the gallery, the docents see that it is all right to fail. Staff must expose the potential to make mistakes so docents can do the same. And, in turn, provide a space where visitors feel safe when asked to share their own thoughts. Stenson emphasizes respecting docents' journeys as educators so that they may respect the visitor's journey of learning when coming to the museum.

A constant reflective process was implemented in OCMA's training to foster a safe place for risk-taking. Debriefing takes place after every practice discussion between the facilitator and participants. The facilitator's personal reflection is shared with the group, making the experience of facilitating transparent. Through group reflection, a community of learners and educators is

Engaging Today's Audience Through Engaging Docents: Case Study of Orange County Museum of Art's Docent Program

created where ideas flow without ownership. Stenson also notes that creating community among docents stems not only from sharing mistakes with one another, but also from sharing food, an integral aspect of the docent program.

OCMA's training program eases docents into touring the galleries. First they must facilitate a one-stop discussion, then a two-stop discussion tour and finally a three-stop tour with visiting students, all followed by reflection debriefs with trainees and staff. This process builds confidence and allows trainees and staff the time and space to make sure they are a good fit for the OCMA docent program. If the staff feels a trainee may not be a good fit, they welcome them to finish the training with the opportunity to grow as well as inform them of alternate ways to support the museum.

The third and final area of research findings was centered on retention, the largest challenge facing OCMA's docent program. The survey results revealed that only 58.6% of docents "felt appreciated" to "completely appreciated" and 41.4% of docents felt "somewhat appreciated" to "completely unappreciated." The high percentage of docents feeling under-appreciated needed to be addressed if OCMA wanted to retain docents. The top three expressions of appreciation identified in the survey that make docents feel valued were free exhibition catalogs, free admission to museum events and ongoing education programs. From this information, a new program was created called Monday Mash-Ups.

OCMA conducted another survey to assess the interests of their docents. That survey showed that docents enjoy artist studio visits and field trips; however, interests were quite varied. Monday Mash-Ups are offered once a month and provide new experiences for the docents as well as recognize the docents as resources to the museum. For example, two of OCMA's docents provided tours of their private art collections. This allowed docents to share their own interests and build community outside of the museum. While giving the docents a place to share their resources, the programs are also designed to inform their teaching in the gallery. A birder, and husband of a docent, led docents in birding at the Newport Harbor then followed by comparing birding techniques to viewing a John Baldessari artwork in the museum. Other Mash-Ups include a one-hour meditation led by Peter Clothier in front of a Richard Diebenkorn painting, a screening of the movie *The Artist* followed by discussion over dinner about nonverbal communication and a field trip to the Laguna Art Museum to participate in a docent-led tour. All Mash-Ups include debriefings to reflect on the experience to touring in the galleries.

OCMA has experienced great success with the implementation of Monday Mash-Ups as inactive docents have become active. Through exclusive and unique programming, OCMA's docents are excited to be part of an exciting program and community. The biggest take away from the Mash-Up success is the acknowledgement that the volunteer docents have resources to contribute to the museum and there can be a two-way exchange between docents and staff.

Stenson states that, "When working with volunteers you need to make sure that their time is being used wisely." Through a revised training program and new programming, OCMA's docents feel more empowered and valued at the museum. The Mash-Ups remind Stenson and docents that teaching is a continuing learning process and about the intrinsic value of their work through meaningful encounters with art. Both staff and the Docent Council were at the table at all stages of the restructuring process, creating a safe place for dialogue among docents and staff which is vital in preparing docents to lead dialogue-based tours. Although the Mash-Ups doubled the programming for the docent program with no increase in staff resources, there is

Engaging Today's Audience Through Engaging Docents: Case Study of Orange County Museum of Art's Docent Program

clearly a strong return on the investment. With OCMA's education programming built on docent volunteers, the volunteers must be engaged to help shift the museum experience for the changing visitor. OCMA encourages other museums interested in providing dialogue-based tours that where the audience is invited to share opinions with docents, docents must respect the visitors, and the museum must respect the its docents.

About the Author/CAM FELLOW



Kaileena Monet Flores-Emnace is expected to graduate with her M.A. in Arts Management from Claremont Graduate University in 2013. After earning her B.A. in Art Education and B.A. in Urban Studies from Loyola Marymount University, Kai discovered her passion for providing quality art education to her urban society, Los Angeles. Currently Kai works as an educator at various museums, including MOCA and LACMA. She also serves on the Board of MESC and on the State Superintendent's Blueprint for Creative Schools Task Force as a youth voice. Kai's art-making practice is fueled by the act of gift giving and is inspired by attending live music events.