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LET'S TALK: META CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DIALOGUE

Prepared for the
University of Washington, Museology

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INTRODUCTION

The need for a “Let’s Talk” project was timely when the proposal was prepared in 2013, and it is timely now, given what some communities across the United States are experiencing. Museums yearn to be perceived and used as gathering places for communities to explore and understand contemporary social issues and challenges. Co-PIs Dr. Kristine Morrissey and Robert Garfinkle have been long interested in dialogue taking place in museums and its potential outcome—public engagement—for quite some time, as evidenced through their previous work. Years ago Dr. Morrissey planted the seed of her interest when she led workshops on writing interpretive labels to incite conversations among museum visitors; and Garfinkle led the development of the award-winning exhibition, *Race: Are We So Different?* at the Science Museum of Minnesota; the exhibit had extensive dialogue programs supporting it, including innovative “Talking Circles.” Their work together on this project builds on their past work and interests, as both are passionate about museums implementing dialogue-based programming so museums can support people as they navigate the social issues of our time.

Please note, this report is not a traditional program evaluation for several reasons: there are many programmatic pieces to this project (see list of deliverables below) and the cost of evaluating all of them is beyond the budgetary scope of this project; the team believes, and I agree, a traditional evaluation of the symposium, which I attended, would not affect a future symposium; and finally, the museum community would be best served if this evaluation explored the current state and future of dialogue in museums through interviews with participants conducted a year after they attended the symposium. That said, I briefly mention the Preliminary Synthesis paper because it provides context for some interviewees’ comments.

While evaluation is most often used as a judgment tool to inform practitioners of the successes and shortcomings of their project, I believe evaluation is at its best when viewed and applied as a learning tool. I studied the interview data to explore the various contexts in which dialogue practice takes place to raise awareness among informal learning organizations of the range of cultures and traditions that exist within the museum sector, because organizational culture and traditions often determine an organization’s behavior.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Let’s Talk produced six deliverables:

1. Preliminary Synthesis paper that sparked conversation at the summer symposium
2. Final Synthesis paper that integrates the Preliminary Synthesis with what was developed at the symposium (to be published in *Curator*)
3. Action plans generated at the symposium
4. Three presentations at national conferences
5. Video segments created at the symposium
6. Graduate course at University of Washington in 2016 (grant funded) and 2017 (Museology-program funded)

The Preliminary Synthesis paper was used at the symposium to focus and shape participants' work at the symposium and, in some cases, to plan for subsequent deliverables. Under the direction of Dr. Morrissey, an advanced graduate student at the University of Washington in the Museology program produced a Preliminary Synthesis paper that summarizes published and unpublished reports to indicate what the museum field knows about the practice and results of dialogue work in museums. In searching for evidence of a research-based practice around dialogue, the paper notes the “troubling gap between the excitement around dialogue and the reality of a research-based practice of dialogue in museums.”¹ The paper calls attention to shortcomings in this emerging practice referred to interchangeably as dialogue, civic discourse, cafés, forums, etc. This and other shortcomings jumpstarted conversations at the summer symposium and inspired participants to begin addressing the gap through their work at the symposium and afterwards.

THE INTERVIEWS

I conducted interviews with five symposium participants to explore the current state and future of dialogue in museums. Three individuals work in science museums/centers, one works in an art museum, and one is a consultant to organizations that seek training in dialogue practice. Data show that interviewees reflect a range of experience with dialogue-based programming—from “desire to practice” to “advanced practice”; and the data also show a range of organizational commitment—from “weak commitment” to “strong commitment.” Data are presented accordingly, and while the sample is small, I believe respondents and the organizations in which they work illustrate the hills and valleys of dialogue practice and organizational commitment that exist across the informal learning landscape.

ADVANCED PRACTICE AND STRONG ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Two of the science museums have advanced dialogue practice and strong organizational commitment to dialogue. I discuss their interviews separately because the context in which they practice dialogue differs.

INTERVIEW #1

This interviewee's very advanced work in dialogue practice is advocated by government agencies that financially support his work, including The National Science Foundation (NSF), Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the Department of Energy (DOE). Some of these projects are complicated collaborations with other organizations (as government-funded projects often are), so his work spreads to others within his circle of colleagues and organizations. He initiated dialogue-focused work with these colleagues around the country and has formed what he calls the “hub.” This group shares resources and learnings, and while his work is “embedded” in his museum—suggesting a strong organizational commitment—he really couldn't say that his colleagues' organizations were as committed as his museum.

¹ Morrissey, Kris and Molly Mandeltort (2016). Let's Talk: A Meta-Conversation about Dialogue. Unpublished paper, University of Washington, Museology, Seattle.

He went on to say that while the government sees this work in a positive light, hub members are asking, “Does this kind of work translate to *public dialogue*,” meaning I think, who is doing all the talking—the museum’s invited guests (e.g., scientists) or the public? He answers the question with “We don’t know the answer.” This interviewee’s museum has an in-house evaluation department that is working with him to evaluate dialogue programs, and based on his comment, the data are not yet available for several of his ongoing projects, but data are available for a project on synthetic biology. The evaluation of this project was used to produce a kit that was sent to 200 sites; 50 are supposed to evaluate their programs. This project convenes “multi-directional conversations” with the public, scientists, and educators, and he wants to know what scientists learn from talking with the public—a comment I did not expect (I expected him to say that he wants to know what the public experiences—but my lens is typically a public lens). And even though he may not know whether these programs “translate to public dialogue,” he believes that “dialogue fits really well with museums because museums are trying to become places where visitors can see something *and* contribute to something. . . . With dialogue, you have to talk with someone who might have a different idea than you and by us having a deliberative conversation, there is an exchange.”

Interestingly, until he attended the symposium, he was unaware that other museum types (history museums in particular) were engaged in this work, and he was introduced for the first time to International Coalition for Sites of Conscience—a primary participant in and IMLS grant recipient for dialogue work in history museums and at historic sites. He came to realize that dialogue practice was “happening in parallel worlds.”

As many other museum professionals and organizations might be just starting out with dialogue practice, he and his organization are well on their way to excelling in this arena. He is envisioning combining citizen science with problem solving as a potential future of dialogue in museums. “Co-creating research questions is interesting; there is a synergy between the citizen science world and dialogue. Both are co-creating knowledge—just different kinds,” later adding, “Take all the ingenuity that walks in the door and ask . . . questions regarding urban planning, while responding in real time to data. We are interested in things that are empowering to people, to engage them in what they think the data can tell us.” And as we continued, fueled with energy from the conversation, he added this: “We think the model should be about collaborations among museums, scientists, government, and the public; we have to land on the right topic, the right question, and the right partners.” This work, his work, is a work in progress.

INTERVIEWEE #2

The other respondent who works in a science museum with a strong organizational commitment to dialogue is also advanced in her dialogue practice; however, she is applying her dialogue work differently—in a different context and towards a different type of understanding. At the time of our conversation, her museum was responding to an event that took place in her immediate community. In July, a black man, was killed by a police officer and I spoke with her in August when the event and its aftermath was still palpable, and while the museum was still actively making sense of the chain of events. After the shooting the museum placed a sign just inside the *Race: Are We So Different?* exhibition, which it soon removed due to objection from a visitor who identified as coming from a

law enforcement family.² When we spoke, she was spending much of her time talking with police officers and museum staff. “We have re-engaged the Circle Keepers (trained facilitators), and Talking Circles (a traditional way for native peoples to solve problems and initiated during the opening of the *Race* exhibition) are happening every day. We have created a dialogue station in the staff room so staff who haven’t been comfortable talking in the circle could have another way to ‘talk back’ and respond. We have held staff meetings so we could talk about it. We are working internally first.”

She also described how she is working externally: “I am working with the City of Saint Paul and we are offering to work with teams within the city and they are coming to the museum to see *Race* and they are participating in circles. They love it. We are using the exhibition and similar processes [that we are using with staff] in a different way. Organizational support for dialogue is very much present at the museum. The new CEO paid for all the Circles after taking down the sign. People are demanding it (the sign); they want it back up. It isn’t over yet.” She also noted that she and the CEO will need to work with the board, to bring them along in the same way they have brought along museum staff, police officers, and the whole city.

After the symposium, this interviewee, with two of her museum’s board members and other museum professionals, spoke on a panel about dialogue at the 2016 American Alliance of Museums (AAM) conference, several months before the Castile shooting. She noted that conference attendees wanted “to go deeper” because they saw the value that dialogue can offer visitors and community members. While she and the first interviewee both work in science museums, she said that dialogue is new for most science museums, citing that the Levine Museum of the New South (a history museum) has been doing this work for years. In her opinion, the future of dialogue in museums is “big,” in part because “museums are desperate now; they need to find new ways, and they want a formula, not realizing that [public engagement] is about relationships and how you work with a community . . . it can’t be sloppy and if it isn’t thoughtful, it won’t work.”

She has observed that “museums keep talking about being relevant” but miss the connection between being relevant and “spending time and resources to figure out *how* to be relevant. It is just good business; you have to dedicate time and resources; it has to become part of budgeting, and they need to connect their desperation with audience engagement.”

DESIRES TO PRACTICE DIALOGUE AND LUKE-WARM ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Two interviewees—one from an art museum and one from a science center—both desire to practice dialogue in their museums but they work in organizations whose leadership lacks a commitment to dialogue practice. Their situations suggest that cultural traditions can sometimes hold back professionals from moving forward with dialogue-based practice.

INTERVIEWEE #3

² For details, see <http://www.twincities.com/2016/07/21/mn-science-museum-removes-philando-castile-sign/>.

Interviewee #3, who works in an art museum, learned a lot about dialogue at the symposium and realized that how art museums understand and practice dialogue is different from how science museums and history museums understand and practice dialogue. She observed that other museums practice dialogue more rigorously and very differently than art museums. She was the only art museum represented at the symposium and didn't know most people, which she attributes to her deep learning and the "rich conversations" that took place in her group work at the symposium. Being removed from her discipline and placed into an interdisciplinary environment was an asset.

She shared this story during the interview: her museum was approached by a local group (similar to Black Lives Matter) that wanted to hold a vigil outside the museum. The museum's leadership approached the request from a policy perspective and upon review, agreed to let them gather, as there was not anything in their policy statements that would lead them to decline the request. There were other, similar circumstances that prompted her to ask, "Should we be more proactive or just wait until someone else raises an issue?" While she knows how she wants to answer the question, moving towards proactivity may require a culture shift within her organization. Culture and traditions determined how leadership approached the request; they did not discuss the value of strengthening community-museum engagement; and they did not use this request as an opportunity to have an internal discussion about the local events that led to the request for the vigil. The organizational approach to addressing the request is very telling.

Interviewee #3 is a new staff member in the museum—there only a few months when we spoke—and as such, she is gauging when might be the right time to address complicated issues in her new organization. When I asked how she currently advocates for dialogue, she noted that dialogue is not top-of-mind for her at the moment and that she is working on strengthening the structure of her department (education and interpretation). However, in analyzing her response—more of which appears below—she may have taken the question to mean, are you doing dialogue-based work? It seems she is taking steps to introduce her team to dialogue-based practice by connecting it to her core value, which she shared: "Where dialogue-based programming comes in for me is my belief that museums are places for people to engage with important community issues, so I have been talking with my staff about how we can be relevant to our community. How can we address important issues? We are having a different level of conversation around dialogue." It appears she is identifying relevance as the end point and dialogue as the means for getting there and she is methodical and measured in how she is exploring how to apply dialogue practice in her organization—working from within her department first.

She had attended the dialogue session at AAM (where interviewee #2 was a panelist) and referenced questions posed on the panel: "How neutral are museums? Do they take a stance, express an opinion?" She has observed that museums try to be objective "and they never are. They try not to take sides on things. If they have a stance, then what is it?" For her, the future of dialogue in museums is partially based on museums' needing to grapple with the latter question and "where to push and where not to push?" She believes art museums have a role that they have yet to seize—and she feels a tension between art museum collections and relevance: "we don't want to leave [museum collections] behind and we shouldn't use them as springboards for something else" because many believe that doing so may undermine the intrinsic value of art. So the question then becomes "what exhibitions are art museums choosing to present?" She points out that a curator in her museum is working on images of John Brown and another on contemporary art and spirituality, but she notes

“those projects are not part of an organizational strategy”—they are being done because staff want to do them.

INTERVIEWEE #4

This interviewee said her science center colleagues were very enthusiastic when she was first invited to attend the symposium, but their enthusiasm has waned and she finds herself “wishing we were doing more” dialogue-based work. Similar to interviewee #3, she desires to integrate dialogue practice within her team first. While she recognizes that her staff isn’t “equipped,” she and her team talk about how to do this work, what they need in terms of professional development, and how they might be able to get to a point of actually starting to apply a dialogue-based approach to their programming work. Her team’s enthusiasm has waned because they perceive the task of infusing dialogue into their work as enormous—because of the organization’s leadership. She has yet to “go up” to management with the idea, though she recognizes how important it is to do so and has been “thinking about how to make dialogue practice an institutional priority” so her staff can make it a departmental priority.

She talked about the science cafés her center hosts, noting that they aren’t really dialogues in the way the symposium described such programs; the people who attend are pro-science and there isn’t a diversity of opinions: “scientist talks, people eat, and people ask questions of the scientist.” She distinguishes between science cafés with adults and those with teens, noting that “teen cafés are more dialogic because teens are not worried about saying something incorrect and scientists aren’t worried about any discussion that might come up—they aren’t worried that teens won’t be interested.”

She recognizes that science centers need to move towards delivering dialogue-based programming: “We face in this country science-perception issues with the public. Science data do not match people’s belief system, and dialogue is the best way for people to broaden their views. Without dialogue, we aren’t going to accomplish much with those not in the choir. People who believe in climate science want to know what to do; the science needs to be broken down and it can’t be done with people who think like you. . . . This whole country could use some training in how to effectively dialogue.”

ADVANCED PRACTICE

The fifth interviewee is a consultant who trains organizations to implement dialogic-learning strategies to advance cultural and racial justice. She is not affiliated with any one organization.

INTERVIEWEE #5

As a dialogic trainer, this interviewee is very advanced in her practice. Based on her symposium experience, she recognizes that dialogue may not necessarily exist in museums now, but she sensed a desire emanating from symposium attendees to “create a movement. . . . Dialogue could be grounded in the historical contexts [that museum offer], which is often absent in our current form of public engagement; I think they could do this in an intentional way and collaboratively. . . . Museums have the potential to lead the way.”

She sees the staff who work in museums as practitioners who want to do social justice work—and some symposium invitees fit her observation. She realizes that desire does not automatically translate

to know-how and advocates that organizations take the time necessary to learn dialogue practice. She said she turns down work when an organization asks her to do a three-hour training; “You don’t undo 400 years of system-building in three hours.” Here is how she talked about the future of dialogue in museums: “With the Sites of Conscience group—there is interest and momentum. Museums know they have important work to do, and their challenge is, in the face of a celebrity-based world, trying to figure out how to bring relevance into the public square. They are trying to find ways to become meaningful places where people from different walks of life come together. We don’t have containers for dialogue. There are few places that exist where people say, ‘let’s go to this place to talk this out.’ Museums can become these places . . . where you learn [from] other people.”

DISCUSSION

I have chosen to discuss three points emerging from the interviews—the ones I believe are most relevant to the larger museum community.

THE AGE-OLD STRUGGLE

These interviews bring to light two divergent points along a continuum that summarize a struggle museums wrestle with: do museums intend to *impart knowledge and a point of view*? Or do museums intend to *inspire visitors to create their own knowledge and point of view without regard to what the visitor concludes*? I dislike setting up dichotomies, but it appears this usual one persists—at least based on the interviews. One museum absolutely intends to impart knowledge—about race; two other organizations seem involved in imparting knowledge to teach science literacy and introduce people to scientists’ ideas, or that is how their work sounded to me. The art museum aligns with the latter two science organizations—except it concerns itself with imparting knowledge to teach art literacy. The tension between what we do (or what we think we do) and what we wish we were doing is apparent. Dialogue-based programming assumes that knowledge and understanding emerge *through two-way, open-ended, facilitated dialogue*. Shifting from imparting knowledge or telling to listening and asking to build understanding through open-ended conversation is hard, as many museum practitioners may have to unlearn what they were taught and learn a new way of working. They may also need to learn and adopt a new way of thinking and interacting with the public. A tall order indeed and a persistent one, too. It may go without saying, but many museums struggle to turn their organization from one that tells to one that thoughtfully and authentically listens, shares, and learns with others, which leads to the second point of discussion—

STAFF AND LEADERSHIP

Of the four interviewees, two alluded to differences between staff desires and leaderships’ actions, intoning that they would like leadership to lead in a more contemporary way. One interviewee did not mention leadership *per se*—only that he has institutional support (and I don’t really know if he meant grant support or leadership support); and another mentioned her CEO and museum board members as active participants in her museum’s dialogue-based work. The schism between actions from the top of an organization and desires from the rest of the organization is not a new challenge for organizations. Museums, like other places, have power structures, leaders, traditions, and staff members. All of these realities mix together to create an organizational culture that, once embedded,

is difficult to penetrate and change without continual work and attention. Some leaders invite questions and seek challenges beyond the ones that typically come with the job, and they ask questions in pursuit of continued organizational learning and change. Most, though, maintain the status quo because daily matters interfere and change is hard. Yet, daily matters—at least the ones that happen outside the museum in communities—are the ones that matter most, if leadership pays attention and intentionally chooses to build and lead a relevant museum.

Staff have a responsibility, too, and change need not happen only from the top down; it can happen from the bottom up or from the middle—moving up and/or down. Two of the interviewees are working from their own spheres of influence—in their departments—with the hope of moving up towards leadership when the time is right. Even if they are not able to move their ideas up, they may very well work within their departments to create the kind of museum practice and public engagement that is a two-way street, taking up matters that can make a difference in people’s lives—their own and their community’s. Interviewee #5 felt momentum in the symposium and that museums have the potential to lead the way and could start a movement. I hope she is right and I hope that “Let’s Talk” represents the beginning of that movement.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

One organization has a lot of grant money for dialogue-based work, and the others did not mention having any financial support for dialogue-based programming. One organization has the support of her leadership, while the former science museum staffer alluded to organizational support but it was unclear if he meant leadership or grant dollars. These interviews suggest one of two organizational engines is required for dialogue-based work: 1) a very skilled development office that writes winning proposals to secure funds from outside sources; or 2) a committed museum leader willing to put operational dollars behind dialogue-based work because it is the right thing to do. Without either, dialogue-based programs might not happen in museums. Science museums have many more funding opportunities compared to art museums and history museums. But even with more funding available, there will never be enough money to go around. As such, one viable strategy remains—leadership will need to step up and show support for those staff members who want a different kind of museum—one that employs dialogue-based programming in its spaces and invites the public to engage with contemporary social issues.