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Abstract For decades, docents have been a fixture of many museums in the United States. It is only in recent years that museums have started to critically examine how to create more effective learning environments for their visitors by creating new kinds of programming. Often, though, docents are overlooked as elements of that kind of change, and much of it stems from the traditional ways in which docents have been trained. However, if museums structure the docents’ learning environments to be more active and dynamic, docents might see themselves more clearly as a community of practice that can positively contribute to a museum’s mission and, more importantly, create meaningful learning experiences for the public.

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Long-distance runners and museum docents have much more in common than meets the eye. In his book How Bad Do You Want It?: Mastering the Psychology of Mind over Muscle, endurance sports writer Matt Fitzgerald highlights the influence of group dynamic on long-distance runners, particularly Kenyan runners that dominate the sport today. Instead of assuming that Kenyan runners have a genetic advantage, Fitzgerald argues that their success can be better explained by culture.¹ The high altitude of Kenya is a factor, but the collective excellence of Kenyan runners comes from the sheer number of runners that train together and push each other to compete at the highest level. While these runners train and race together as a team, running is still an individual activity. The group propels the individuals to run better.

Docents are arguably part of a similar discipline. Their ultimate goal is not to compete with each other, but they continue to develop by learning from their peers. Whether they are sharing strategies for teaching in the museum or about books on 19th century printmakers, there is a distinct part of docents’ work ethic that is social.
Much has already been written about the history of docent programs\textsuperscript{2} and the logistical factors of docent training and evaluation.\textsuperscript{3} However, there is an emerging focus on the broader learning models and methodologies that have been applied to current gallery educator programs. Cindy Foley, Executive Deputy Director for Learning and Experience at the Columbus Museum of Art, spearheaded an institution-wide initiative to center all of the museum’s learning objectives on creativity.\textsuperscript{4} Kimberly McCray, Lecturer in Museum Studies at Baylor University, has made extensive connections between adult learning theory and training for docents and paid gallery educators.\textsuperscript{5}

Social learning theorist Etienne Wenger-Trayner\textsuperscript{6} has developed a concept for learning environments called communities of practice. Wenger defines these as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”\textsuperscript{7} This certainly applies to organizations of all kinds, but it can be a particularly powerful way of framing a docent program. When there is balance between emphasizing the information that the museum gives to its docents with the expertise and resources that docents share with each other, a more complete picture of the docents’ development exists. I will outline the basic components of Wenger-Trayner’s theory of communities of practice and provide practical examples of its application to docent programs from my work as the Assistant Director of Docent Learning at the Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM).

**A brief overview of communities of practice**

Wenger-Trayner first used the term **communities of practice** in 1999 in *Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, co-written with researcher Jean Lave, which focused on the titular concept in which “learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community.”\textsuperscript{8} This concept grew out of an investigation of the learning environments of apprenticeships and the communities that are created as a result. The authors concluded that learning and practice are equally important factors in a social context like a community.

This led Wenger-Trayner to focus more closely on communities of practice as a means of analyzing social learning environments. One component of his analysis addresses the role of knowledge and our understanding of it. Noting that knowledge exists in the first-hand experience of knowing something, he argues that the social and individual modes of knowing are working in concert with each other. In *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, co-written with Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder, Wenger-Trayner writes that “today’s complex problem solving requires multiple perspectives...we need others to complement and develop our own expertise.”\textsuperscript{9} The authors elaborate on this later in the book by claiming that knowledge is not static, but rather “resides in the skills, understanding, and relationships of
its members as in the tools, documents, and processes that embody aspects of this knowledge."  

Communities of practice have three basic elements: domain, community, and practice. The domain is the setting and context, the “common ground.” Using a docent program as an example, the museum itself and the resources and events that are unique to the institution, such as training sessions and interpretive materials, are the domain. Each museum is different from the next, and no two docent programs are exactly alike. The community is the “social fabric of learning,” activating the domain. In our example, the docents themselves are the community, sharing ideas and working together in the same domain. The practice is the “specific knowledge the community develops, shares, and maintains.” As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the knowledge within a practice is more dynamic and active when it is shared among peers. A docent’s teaching practice is driven by interaction with museum visitors, and it is strengthened and improved by sharing ideas with fellow docents and the museum’s education staff.

In recent years, Wenger-Trayner has expanded this idea with other social learning researchers into the concept of landscapes of practice. Instead of seeing knowledge as a social element in a single community, a landscape of practice is a “complex system of communities of practice and the boundaries between them.” In other words, we learn new things through several types of disciplines, professional or otherwise. No one community has the market cornered on a body of knowledge. In a museum setting, what we know about art is also informed by historical, political, cultural and social markers of the past, present, and future, all of them informing our interpretations. Moreover, we have more profound learning experiences in landscapes of practice. Beverly and Etienne Wenger-Trayner, in their 2015 book Learning in Landscapes of Practice, describe a “journey within and across practices” that “shapes who we are.”

In a lecture at the University of Brighton in 2013, Etienne Wenger-Trayner said that “learning has to be an experience of meaning and interpretation of the world, and the ability to interpret the world in a new way.” This has significant implications for informal learning institutions like museums, not only in the environments they facilitate for their visitors, but also in how they view the practice of their docents or gallery educators. Some of the impetus for Wenger-Trayner’s recent work is to respond to how we learn in the 21st century. With the prevalence of the internet and the convenient access that we have to information through various devices, people can learn about a host of topics with ease. What those devices cannot do, however, is replicate the human connection that can make the learning process meaningful and lasting. This is true for museums as well. We cannot expect museum docents to be animated encyclopedias, churning out facts and figures, because visitors can just as easily find that information on their own smartphones. On the other hand, if docents’ internal modes of learning are predicated on what we share with each other, and the modes encourage
communal understanding, docent interactions with visitors might better lend themselves to the ways in which we learn today.

I will focus more narrowly on the three elements of communities of practice (domain, community and practice) as they relate to docent programs. Some of what follows is germane to docent programs at many museums, but other examples are more specific to initiatives at the CAM.

Domain
Docents have a two-part domain. The museum itself is a very tangible place in which docents meet and work. Also, there is an intangible domain that docents share as gallery teachers. Though the CAM’s Division of Learning & Interpretation (L&I) staff regularly lead public programs in the galleries, only docents have the specific role of leading public museum tours. It is tempting to view the museum building as docents’ only domain, but the docents’ roles as gallery teachers are equally important to understanding their work.

Until recently, CAM’s docent training was exclusively lecture-based and led by the museum’s curators. This is common at many American art museums. These sessions are presentations with slides of the artworks that will be included in an upcoming exhibition, and the sessions usually last one to two hours. The lecture format works fairly well for disseminating information, but it lacks a few key components. First and foremost, the word “training” encompasses the instruction of skill and practice. Lectures, no matter how effective they can be, are one-way transmissions of information from the speaker to the audience. In this case, lectures do not necessarily provide time and space for docents to learn how to put that new information into practice in a way that can resonate with visitors. There is also the matter of modeling. Museum education practice has shifted more prominently toward more dialogic and inclusive programming in the past few decades. If docents’ training does not reflect that mode of learning, it is hard to expect and demand that docents will effectively teach that way.

While reserving the lecture format for content-heavy topics like exhibitions, L&I staff established another series of regular training sessions that are discussion-based and located in the museum’s galleries. These sessions, called workshops, are shorter and more concentrated on gallery teaching techniques with the artworks on view at the museum. (I will address the relevance to docents’ teaching practice in more detail later in this article.) Further, the workshops occur multiple times in the same week, allowing staff to work with smaller groups of docents in each session and to ensure that everyone can participate in the dialogue. This type of training makes progress toward addressing what it means to train and develop skills, because those qualities are prioritized over receiving information. The workshop trainings are also more reflective of the experiences that the museum expects the docents to facilitate, placing emphasis on people talking about art together. The tie that binds these two concepts is the docents’ domain. They are training to improve their work as docents, a domain
that is unique to them in the institution, and they are actively doing so in the museum galleries themselves. As a result, the workshops emphasize that the museum galleries are a place for conversation and active learning for docents and with visitors.

This idea was taken a step further with the training of new docents at the CAM starting in 2017. Much like the workshops, the training program for new docents-in-training revolved around group discussion and participatory learning experiences in the galleries. The lecture format, however, was not integrated into their training. L&I staff and the museum’s curators recorded a series of webinars on the museum’s permanent collection and posted them online for docents-in-training to watch at home before attending their weekly training session at the museum. In turn, docents-in-training had a more active role in their development that they shared with each other. This change also demonstrated that the domain matters. By structuring the new docent training program this way, L&I staff centered the regular learning environment around the museum’s galleries, and the group discussions in and outside of training sessions provided opportunities for reflection on the docents’ roles at the museum.

Because a community of practice is a social learning model, it is only fitting that the purely social functions of a docent program are connected to the domain. The docents organize and attend two main social events each year, and both are held at the museum. L&I staff do this not only to establish a common meeting place that everyone can access, but also to show that their work and association with the museum is worth celebrating. This has carried over into the docents’ informal social gatherings, as well. Docents that tour on specific days of the week will get together regularly for lunch at the museum. A group of docents that came into the program together will routinely meet in the galleries to share ideas and new information. Those developments are a product of placing value on the domain.

**Community**

The domain becomes meaningful when there is a strong community within it. The CAM docent program has typically been a thoughtful and open organization, with docents leading walkthroughs of galleries for each other and sharing research on the museum’s collection in self-organized gallery talks. Until recently, though, there had not been a formal outlet in their training that emphasized their community. CAM recognized that doing so could have a significant effect on the group’s morale.

First and foremost, building a docent community had to be initiated by the staff. L&I staff knew that they needed to critically consider their interactions with the docents and how they nurture relationships with them. Also, staff had to clearly communicate with the entire docent group, particularly on urgent and important issues. L&I staff instituted a weekly email newsletter to provide timely updates, rather than sporadic communications. This complemented the website for docents that the staff updates with resources and training details. The regular town hall-style meetings, called Open Forum, were restructured to solicit discussion topics.
from docents about general program issues prior to meetings to make the dialogue more relevant to docent needs, and to help the staff respond more effectively. Staff have made a more conscious effort to regularly attend docent training sessions and social events in order to develop more personal relationships with docents, as well as to demonstrate that staff still has much to learn. Along those lines, the L&I staff emphasizes what we as professionals have in common with the docents, rather than relying heavily on a hierarchical structure. While L&I staff make many executive decisions about the docent program, there are many commonalities in the work that staff and docents both do.

CAM’s L&I staff members applied the same ideas to the docent training sessions themselves. Workshops are built around the domain of the docents, but the workshops are activated by the community that docents have created amongst themselves. Some aspects of the workshops are led and directed by L&I staff, but the lion’s share of each workshop is devoted to group discussion and interaction. Instead of hewing to very specific talking points, the workshops move in the direction that the group wants to go. As a result, there is time for docents to share ideas with each other in their training sessions.

With the training of new docents, a more urgent need to establish and emphasize community exists. L&I staff carefully thought through the most effective methods to develop the skills and practices required to be a docent, realizing that new docents will feel more confident when they are more invested in the work they are doing. Early in the training program, staff prioritized more time for docents-in-training to forge relationships with each other and to develop a sense of trust amongst the entire group. This occurred in their weekly training sessions, but also through their online classroom platform, where their weekly assignments and readings were hosted along with a message board for docents-in-training and staff members to communicate with one another.

**Practice**

As the community infuses the domain with its presence, the practice ties it all together. This is the most critical facet of a docent program because it can be interpreted and executed in a number of ways. More importantly, any emphasis on cultivating practice should be balanced with the domain. Stress the practice too much, and the demands on the docents might become overwrought. Neglect it, and there is potential for the quality to diminish. There is a middle ground in establishing a standard for a docent program as a community of practice.

As mentioned above, CAM’s docents’ regular training has been split between lectures and workshops. Each year, they are required to attend both types of training. L&I staff schedule an equal number of lecture-based sessions and workshops to establish an equitable balance between acquiring information and interacting with others. In turn, there is very little redundancy between the lectures and the workshops. Curators and L&I staff ensure that docents learn about the historical and cultural context of a temporary exhibition or installation.
of the permanent collection when they attend the lectures. Any given workshop, however, focuses more specifically on aspects of gallery teaching like creating dialogue with various audiences or incorporating interpretive elements like tactile objects or technological aids. At times, workshops explore a current cultural or social issue and develop techniques for connecting them to the museum’s permanent collection. No matter the topic, the format allows docents and staff to incorporate the intangible factors of interacting with a group of people, such as flexibility and empathy.

We also consider the practice through regular docent evaluation. It is important for staff to directly observe docents at work and to gather empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the docent training program. This can be one of the most difficult facets of managing a docent program depending on the size of the docent corps and the number of museum staff that are available to observe docent-led tours. To ease the staff workload and to minimize the anxiety that some docents might feel about being observed, only 30-40 docents are evaluated each year among five full-time L&I staff. All docents are assessed at some point over a three-year period. This affords the staff the opportunity to focus on providing more relevant feedback to a smaller number of docents. It also allows docents and staff members to designate more quality time for reflection together.

Many of the aforementioned examples overlap with each other, but that demonstrates how intrinsic the communities of practice model is to a docent program. Rather than isolating one of the three parts of a community of practice, it is important to understand how all three work in concert and propel docents to maximize their impact on the museums that they serve.

Limitations and considerations
Communities of practice might sound ideal, but they have their flaws. Fortunately, Wenger-Trayner has given thought to the model’s limitations. Just as he outlines the efficacy of communities of practice through domain, community, and practice, he uses the same three categories to highlight their weaknesses. Wenger-Trayner notes that, “like many human weaknesses, community disorders are frequently an extreme version of a community’s strength.” This makes for a fairly easy diagnosis. A few of his concerns in particular are relevant to docent programs.

Regarding domain, Wenger-Trayner addresses the ways that power dynamics can undermine a community of practice. His notion of factionalism, which contributes to in-groups “fighting for their own special interests, approach, or school of thought” is particularly relevant to docent programs. As mentioned above, docent training methods have changed in recent years. An active docent today may have been trained in a manner that is no longer in use. When each stage of those changes is represented across an entire docent corps, it is possible for more veteran docents to grow attached to their perception of what a museum should look like or how learning takes place, projecting that onto others in the program. These types of
The dynamics can be mitigated by focusing on relationships among docents and staff, placing value on sharing the strengths of each person’s training and experience.

Conversely, close relationships can negatively alter the composition of the community. In references to cliquish groups, Wenger-Trayner notes that it is possible that “close friendship and the desire for a sociable atmosphere can prevent members from critiquing each other or from seeking to deepen their understanding of their domain.”19 Whether cliques exist by social class, according to years of experience at the museum, or another delineation, they can affect a docent program as a whole. Fortunately, there is already a mechanism to counteract this kind of insularity. As museums recruit and train new docents, they bring new voices and perspectives into the fold. When newer docents are empowered to participate and to feel ownership over their experience, they can add new energy to their docent community.

The practice is the pivotal element. While the practice can be the binding force that coheres a docent program, it can also be its biggest deterrent. Among other culprits, Wenger-Trayner points to dogmatism as competence that “can lead to an unbending commitment to established canons and methods.”20 This can be a serious problem for museums as they strive to reach wider audiences that learn in varied ways and work toward becoming more inclusive and equitable institutions. If docents represent the largest part of a museum’s frontline team, the ramifications of dogmatism are even more severe. However, the positive aspects of a docent program’s practice can be reinforced by placing value on the docents’ participation, and actively involving them in the development of teaching methods and logistical concerns like scheduling and docent program policies.

It is possible that the most significant question to ask of this model is this: Does it make for better docents? Ultimately, this is difficult to answer with any certainty. While most museum educators operate with similar objectives for their programming, each institution assesses their docent or guide programs differently. However, this might be beside the point. People are imperfect, despite our best intentions. As long as museums employ humans to facilitate learning experiences in their galleries, they will always have to address areas of improvement. A community of practice, though, applies a fitting framework to a docent’s work ethic, which is inherently human-centric.

**Conclusion**

It might be easy to think that Kenyans have the market cornered on a strong communal culture that produces great runners. However, Fitzgerald also refers to a similar dynamic among Finnish runners in the early 20th century, and to an emerging movement in the United States in recent years.21 The same pattern applies to docent programs. Whether a museum’s gallery educators are volunteers or are paid, a tight-knit group or a sprawling corps of more than a hundred, a community of practice exists. The difference lies in how much a museum emphasizes a community of practice as a mode of learning and development.

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Notes


6. Before 2015, he wrote as Etienne Wenger. His name is now Etienne Wenger-Trayner, and I will use his current name throughout the body of the text.


10. Ibid., 11.


12. Ibid., 19.


14. Fortunately, there are dozens of books and journals that have documented this development. A few foundational texts for me are *The Educational Role of the Museum*, ed. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill; *From Periphery to Center: Art Museum Education in the*
21st Century, ed. Pat Villeneuve; Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience by Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee.


18. Ibid., 143.

19. Ibid., 145.

20. Ibid., 149.


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