

MuseumsForward

Collaboration beyond stereotypes: Understanding what really matters to museum professionals

Kevin Glatt

Abstract

This study advances a positive perspective on collaboration in museums. While the development of more collaborative museum practices has been the subject of much research and discussion in recent decades, underlying much of this research and discourse are persistent narratives framing collaboration in museums as a battleground for inter-departmental warfare. Drawing on Anne Edwards' work on the criticality of mutual understanding of *what matters* to practitioners to the success of inter-disciplinary collaborations, and aligning with trends in research within and beyond museology that utilize relational, learning-oriented, and systems-based approaches to organizational change, this study sought to develop a positive, human-centered perspective on collaboration in exhibit development, which served as a context paradigmatic of museological practice in general. Thirteen museum professionals who worked together on a highly collaborative and successful exhibit development project were interviewed about what matters to them, as well as their perception of what matters to their collaborators. Interview data were analyzed inductively to identify recurring themes. The results generate a picture that contrasts starkly with the stereotypical, reductive narratives alluded to above. The motivations identified by interviewees were complex and multidimensional, and there existed both consequential divergence within and significant overlap between departments. The findings of this study suggest that museum professionals may be better positioned to work more collaboratively than inherited departmental structures and museological discourse suggest. They also point to the expansive potential exhibit development holds to be a site of experimentation and development of new, more collaborative museum practices from the ground-up.

Keywords

collaboration ; exhibit development ; motivations and values ; organizational learning

Committee Chair

Dr. Jessica Luke

Committee Members

Dr. Kira Schabram ; Dr. Katie Headrick Taylor

Accepted: June 10, 2022

Published: (date uploaded to MuseumsForward)

Introduction

Historically, museums are structured along deep departmental divides which inhibit cross-departmental collaboration (Haupt et al., 2022; Villaespesa & Álvarez, 2020) and feed a general perception of such collaboration as inevitably and prohibitively challenging and conflict-ridden (Knudsen & Olesen, 2018). Attempts to develop more collaborative museum practices have mostly been conceptualized at the institutional level. For example, popular case studies of organizational change in museums often involve dramatic restructuring of organizational charts (Janes, 2013; Merritt & Fogarty, 2021; Vagnone, 2021), and a dominant theme in more theoretical literature on organizational change in museums centers on institutional values (Anderson, 2012; Davies et al., 2013; Fleming, 2013). However, research shows that many change efforts pursued at a broad institutional level are ineffective because they don't account for interpretation by and agency of individual practitioners (McCall & Gray, 2014; Schonfeld & Sweeney, 2019). This study sought to advance a perspective on the development of greater inter-departmental collaboration, utilizing exhibition development as a paradigmatic context and centering individual museum professionals' perceptions of their own and peers' values and motivations.

Museological approaches to developing more collaborative practices

As noted, much of the literature and discourse surrounding the development of more collaborative practices in museums is concentrated at the organizational level, providing little guidance at the

level of everyday practice (Knudsen & Olesen, 2018; McCall & Gray, 2014). There are, however, many strands of research that do just that but have yet to be integrated into the general museological literature and discourse. Before describing the specific approach this study adopted, a brief survey of some of this research will help situate this study in relationship to it, hopefully providing grounds for its continued integration into the wider museological literature and discourse.

Human-centered and relational approaches

While they precede the pandemic and social justice movements of recent years, calls for more human-centered and relational museum practices have intensified during that time, with arguments emerging for the re-conceptualization of the museum not as a building or a collection but as its people (Whitaker, 2021) and advocating for the centering of relationships in museum practice (Murawski, 2018; Truels & Fisher, 2021).

Organizational learning

Of the wealth of resources to draw upon from the field of organization studies, perhaps the most widely adopted in museology is the idea of organizational learning (Korn et al., 2021; Reich, 2016; Torres & Preskill, 2001). This concept flips approaches to organizational change that are planned and implemented top-down, focusing instead on cultivating emergent change by leveraging opportunities for learning within existing practices. As Reich (2016) explains, the core insight driving this approach is the recognition that, contrary to popular conceptions of learning as a strictly individual phenomenon, learning can be productively conceptualized as occurring across individual, team, and organizational levels.

Systems thinking

As a broad framework, the view of museums as systems encourages practitioners to appreciate and develop interconnections between functional units traditionally considered independent. While sometimes named and centered in scholarship (Jung & Love, 2017; Latham & Simmons, 2014), this perspective is increasingly apparent, if not explicitly cited, in a growing amount of museological research (see, e.g., Korn et al., 2021, Villaespesa & Álvarez, 2020). Villaespesa and Álvarez, for example, utilize *visitor journey mapping* as a tool for bridging

traditionally separate departments and fostering larger organizational change.

Cultural-historical & sociocultural theories of learning

As a systems-based approach to understanding and enacting collective learning, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (“CHAT”) and sociocultural learning theories more broadly are well-aligned with concepts like organizational learning and systems thinking. Ash (2014) cites as unique contributions of CHAT its emphasis on the *object-oriented* and *mediated* nature of human activity, points which, respectively, effectively unite individual and collective units of analysis and ground theory in concrete interactions and processes. Ultimately, the central aim of most applications of CHAT is the facilitation of *expansive learning*, in which contradictions or tensions inherent to historically evolving and intertwined systems of activity are surfaced and resolved to develop entirely new forms of activity. As Ward (2018) writes, conflicts in practices are seen not as hindrances to productivity, but as “illuminative hinges” which enable collectives to “reconstruct the system in a concrete and rich way” (p. 191-192). This aspect of CHAT sets it apart from many approaches to organizational change in museums in that, rather than aiming for institutional survival or expanded visitorship, it is oriented toward radical transformation of whole systems (and, for most CHAT scholars, transformation aimed explicitly at the development of more just and equitable systems).

Exhibition development as paradigm

Several authors cited above call out exhibition development specifically in relation to the development of more collaborative practices in general, noting its inherently collaborative nature (Jung & Love, 2017; McKenna-Cress & Kamien, 2013) and its potential as a generator of organizational learning (Korn et al., 2021; Morgan, 2013). Of particular relevance to this study, Lee (2007) draws on the sociocultural concept of *communities of practice* to explain conflict in exhibition development as the inevitable result of a meeting of different cultures. While highly valuable for its potentially generative reframing of conflict in collaboration, the framing of the paper itself is indicative of a wider trend noted by Knudsen and Olesen (2018): the persistent framing of collaboration in museums in terms of, for example, “conflict” (Lee, 2007), “turf battles” (Toohey & Wolins, 1993), or “competing values” (Davies et al., 2013; Villeneuve, 2019). These framings are reflective of

pervasive narratives according to which the starting point for collaboration in museums involves a few isolated individuals pursuing irreconcilably different goals and struggling for power over which goals are prioritized.

This study sought to build upon the invaluable contributions of all the above authors while simultaneously pushing back upon the wider narrative that conceptualizes collaboration in exhibition development as an inevitably conflict-ridden, zero-sum game. Given the well-established role the framing of discourse plays in both the longer-term construction of social realities and shorter-term individual perceptions and sense-making within unfolding situations (Bushe & Marshak, 2014; Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Heynoski & Quinn, 2012; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001), it is a critical task to question the accuracy and utility of such framings and explore potential alternatives.

Positive approaches to studies of organizational change

As noted previously, one trend in museological research is the adoption of organization studies concepts like organizational learning. Although there exist other notable examples of museology scholars utilizing organizational scholarship (see, e.g., Davies et al. 2013), there remains a vast amount of organization studies literature of great potential value that has yet to be taken up in museology. This study intended to build bridges not only between various strands of museological research on collaboration but to the discipline of organization studies as well, not by adapting a particular construct but by aligning its approach with recent trends in the field in order to lay ground for further connections.

One particularly strong trend in organization studies over the past two decades is the use of a *positive approach* to research on organizational change. Various applied as a *unique lens or perspective* (reinterpreting challenges or obstacles as opportunities and strength-building experiences), a *focus on positive deviance* (investigating outcomes that dramatically exceed common or expected performance), an *affirmative bias that fosters resourcefulness* (unlocking and elevating resources in individuals, groups, and organizations), or an *examination of virtuousness or the best of the human condition* (based on the assumption that an inclination exists in all human systems toward achieving the highest aspirations of humankind), “positive organizational scholarship does not ignore the negative; instead, it seeks to investigate the positive processes, outcomes and interpretations embedded in negative phenomena” (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012, p. 8). Positive approaches to the study of collaboration

in particular tend to privilege relational phenomena like high-quality connections and psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2009; Dutton & Ragins, 2017; Newman et al., 2017). This study sought to incorporate aspects of all the above variations on a positive approach by investigating a particularly positive case of collaborative exhibition development, centering relational phenomena, and affirming positive aspects of existing practices that can be built upon.

Anne Edwards: Relational expertise in collaboration

Utilizing Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, Edwards (2017) has spent decades studying emergent, inter-disciplinary collaborations, and has identified *relational expertise* as a form of expertise that complements and augments subject-matter expertise. Edwards has found relational expertise to be critical to successful, fluid, and responsive collaboration with professionals working across practices on complex, emergent forms of work. Critically, *relational expertise* mainly consists of an ability to understand and communicate about *what matters* to practitioners working in other disciplines. For Edwards, *what matters* refers to the motives and values that drive a person's work as part of a specific practice and shape what phenomena are perceived as salient in any situation; it captures both individual practitioners' motivations and values rooted in their particular life experiences and those that in a sense define and drive the development of the practice or tradition to which they were drawn and within which they work. According to Edwards, the development of *common knowledge* of what matters within different professions not only facilitates collaboration in-the-moment, but, more importantly, enhances and expands collective interpretations of complex problem spaces and thereby serves as a generative source of the development of future practices.

Edwards' work on relational expertise and the role of understanding what matters to collaborators in inter-disciplinary collaborations stands out as particularly relevant in relation to the persistence of negative framings of collaboration in museums infused with stereotypes about what matters to museum professionals working within different departments. This study sought to question those stereotypes about what matters to museum professionals working in different departments, and to do so utilizing a more positive framing of collaboration in museums as an alternative to the representation of siloed individuals approaching collaboration as a "turf battle" rife with conflict.

Study purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how what matters to museum professionals positions them for collaboration. The study was driven by three research questions:

1. What motivations do museum professionals cite as driving their work?
2. How, and to what extent, do museum professionals understand what matters to their collaborators?
3. What factors do museum professionals cite as important to successful collaboration?

Study design

This study utilized a phenomenological design to gain a rich understanding of what matters to individual museum practitioners as well as their perspectives on what matters to their collaborators (Creswell, 1998). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with employees of a medium-sized art museum on the West Coast. The institution was identified as a relevant setting for this study because it had recently undertaken a large-scale gallery reinstallation project. The greater size and scope of the project in comparison to more routine exhibition development projects at the institution meant that it required more extensive inter-departmental collaboration. This study utilized this specific reinstallation project as a special case (Siggelkow, 2007) through which to develop a rich understanding (Weick, 2007) of how what matters to museum professionals positions them for collaboration. Importantly, this understanding was achieved via induction from interview data rather than being guided by a pre-determined coding scheme (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Sampling and participants

Sampling was carried out after the identification of the reinstallation project as a context for the study. One member of the project team provided a list of 15 additional members of the team who were then recruited through email. Thirteen (including the original gatekeeper)

Methodology

agreed to participate in the study. Relevant information about the participants is included in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' departmental affiliations and years of experience at the beginning of the project

Participant	Department	Years of Experience at Institution	Years of Experience in Museums
1	Education	0	0
2	Education	8	13
3	Collections	0	6
4	Collections	2	14
5	Exhibits	0	21
6	Curatorial	0	0
7	Exhibits	8	11
8	Curatorial	0	21
9	Collections	13	23
10	Collections	30	30
11	Exhibits	2	2
12	Education	8	11
13	Curatorial	27	>30

Researcher positionality, background, and perspectives

As a qualitative study, all aspects of this research, from design and data collection to analysis and reporting, were heavily influenced by the particular life experiences and perspectives of the author. It is therefore relevant to readers' interpretation of this article to note that the author of this study is a white, non-disabled, cisgender, heterosexual male who came to museum work after training and several years of experience as a middle school and high school STEM educator, and whose experience as a museum professional has largely been in the role of field trip program educator. My interest in the topic of study stemmed from personal experience of the siloed, deeply hierarchical nature of museums, a desire to better understand the wider practices of my peers working in other museum departments,

and a commitment to supporting the development of more humanizing and equitable spaces in which the flourishing of all individuals (whether “employees,” “interns,” “volunteers,” “visitors,” “non-visitors,” etc.) is collectively cultivated through engagement with and stewardship of our shared cultural heritage. Finally, it should be noted that the author worked as an intern at the institution in question prior to conducting the study, and that this pre-existing relationship obviously influenced the identification of the context of the study.

Data collection & analysis

Data were collected through interviews conducted via Zoom videoconferencing software and recorded for transcription. Interviews were kept to 60 minutes to respect participants’ time commitment; in one case, the interviewee agreed to extend the interview to 90 minutes. Interview questions were intended to explore what matters to participants and participants’ understanding of what matters to their collaborators (See Appendix A for interview guide). The data were analyzed using content analysis to identify patterns in participants’ responses relevant to each research question (Patton, 2015).

Results

1) What motivations do museum professionals cite as driving their work?

As study participants talked about what brought them to museum work, and what keeps them engaged in that work, four key themes emerged: i) a desire to support the arts; ii) a desire to work directly with art; iii) a desire to make art accessible to others; and iv) a desire to collaborate with others. These themes were not mutually exclusive; many participants cited all of these motivations as pertinent to their work.

Supporting the arts in general

Many museum professionals in this study were reportedly driven in their work by a passion for the arts, or by a desire to support others’ artistic endeavors. More than one participant commented that they didn’t want to make art themselves, but they wanted to support those who did and help them have an impact in the world. In the words of one museum professional,

"I've just always had an appreciation for the arts, and I wanted to work in a creative environment...I've had other jobs before and it's always the most fulfilling thing for me...I wasn't going to be an artist in any way. I just knew that I wanted to support the work and the creativity of those who did pursue it as a profession."
(Participant 11)

Another participant explained,

"I was always interested in the arts when I was younger, and then once I was able to learn more about what kind of careers were available in the arts, meaning, like, you know, not only visiting museums, but also when I started internships or kind of entry-level positions at museums, just being exposed to all the different departments and projects, so slowly learning the operations of it, tied with my passion for the arts, so it kind of all came together. I wanted to do something that was impactful in the way...I didn't want to be a curator, but I wanted to, like, work with the curators, you know, I wanted to work with the art itself." (Participant 7)

Working directly with art, working with their hands

Participants were also driven by a love of art objects or a feeling of being connected to art objects. What mattered was being able to work directly with those objects, to handle those objects, and to care for those objects. One museum professional simply said, "I love material culture, I just love objects ... the care of the objects [is] my most important focus at work" (Participant 10). Another explained,

"I think, you know, earlier on, I approached it more from an academic side in terms of research, because that's what I had been doing in school...While it had been nice it was like, 'Oh, but this isn't for me all the time'... but what I did find is that I just have a really great interest in caring for the works and facilitating their care. I really enjoy being hands on with objects, and so, in my role now, I just feel like it's the perfect way [to do that]."
(Participant 4)

Another participant said,

"I have to say that that might still be my favorite job ever because I was in a basement just with objects getting to, like, pick them up and find out about them and turn them over and, you know, commune with them. So there's a certain part of me that, you know, thinks that the connection with people is what's most important and knows that, but at the same time, my connection with objects is amazingly powerful to me personally, and I do want to bring that to people."
(Participant 8)

Making art accessible to others

Museum professionals talked about the importance of making art accessible to others, in particular those who might not see themselves as "art museum people" or who may not feel welcome in museums. Typically, these study participants had meaningful experiences with art in their childhood, experiences that profoundly impacted them in some way, and they wanted to be part of making those experiences possible for others. One participant said,

"I became interested in working in museums because I did not grow up going to them, and having discovered that I was interested in them on my own, like on a free day in high school, I've always been curious as to why I didn't even know these were such cool places. And I have really dedicated my career to making museums accessible and engaging for people who might not readily see themselves there or be comfortable visiting."
(Participant 12)

Another participant explained,

"I just think that, you know, all students should have access to full and enriched arts curriculum and that's not the case as it stands. And I think, yeah, just being able to play a part in righting that inequity is really important to me, especially because as a student in public schools - I grew up in Michigan and so seeing like art from China for the first time in the form of a film in a class - that was like really big in my own conception of, you know, my family and my identity, and so being able

to play a part in that, too, for a lot of young people in [CITY REDACTED], is very meaningful.” (Participant 1)

Collaborating with others

Additionally, participants described the opportunity to collaborate with their peers, facilitate the work of others, learn from each other, and be a part of the larger work of the museum as primary motivators of their work. One museum professional simply said, “The main super important aspect of the job is to facilitate the work of others” (Participant 10). Another explained,

“I came from that angle actually not at all thinking that I would work in a museum ... it actually evolved through my graduate school experiences into museums because that's where a lot of research is happening, that's where a lot of the jobs are, and that's really where a lot of the collaboration is happening. That's where you're learning from colleagues, that's where you're, you know, working amongst colleagues and exchanging ideas.” (Participant 3)

Another participant said,

“I think it is the collaboration aspect of it... each stage is so different, and I get to sort of like be a part of what each person is thinking a little bit all the way through...I think that sort of just like being able to work with a number of people on whatever they do best and sort of shadowing them and learning from them has been the best part of my job.” (Participant 11)

Taken together, these themes indicate a deeply relational conception of what matters to these museum professionals, connecting museum objects, employees, visitors, and the wider arts and cultural landscape. The objects of these themes are decidedly more community- than individual-focused, supporting Edwards’ choice of the term “what matters” over more individual-centered terms like “motive.” Additionally, in considering, as Edwards does, the relationship between what matters and the development of future practices, it is notable that these themes are extremely open-ended and general.

2) How, and to what extent, do museum professionals understand what matters to their collaborators?

Following Edwards' emphasis on the development of *common knowledge* of what matters to collaborators, participants were asked to think about the exhibition development project that served as the context for this study and to reflect on what they thought mattered to their colleagues about that work and their work in general. Many had difficulty thinking about what mattered to others or expressed discomfort doing so. For example, one participant stated, "I'm finding it overwhelming to speak on what others might think matters to them, I don't know..." (Participant 11). Another participant noted, "I could say what I think I know with the caveat that I don't actually...I haven't had a conversation, so all I can know is what I understand or see looking at people's work or talking with them" (Participant 2). This explicit insight into the source of this participant's hesitation aligns with a broader trend in participants' responses: participants often spoke about not so much what they thought mattered to their colleagues but rather their colleagues' actions, personality traits, or strengths:

"I mean I don't know specifically why [my colleague] came to this work, but I find them a very curious person and always wanting to learn and asking questions about the art, and I feel like, you know, they retained so much information, and I find that they're passing along that information ... and then talking about it with others, and you know, have a real sense of pride in what we do at the museum." (Participant 11)

"[This colleague] came to this work...they're a true kind of arts fan. They come from a performing arts background, but they're just the kind of person that loves to be engulfed in all the arts and they are a very friendly and personable person, which makes them good at their job in talking to vendors and their design team. Because they care so much about the art and the exhibitions it kind of translates, their passion translates into how they pitch projects to their team, how they describe things, it's almost, you know as if, like, they were the curator, right, like 'Oh my god, this work is so great and wonderful,' like, they're just one of those people that is so engulfed in the arts. The goal of their job and their team is to, you know, communicate the art into the public space and they're very organized and

make sure that the things that we're producing fit our audiences." (Participant 7)

Participants also spoke about what matters to colleagues by way of departmental affiliation. For example, over half of participants initially spoke about the curatorial team collectively and required prompting to discuss what matters to individual curators (which most participants were able to do, at least in terms of their actions, personality traits, or strengths).

As Edwards notes, the development of common knowledge of what matters to collaborators "is created over time in interactions in sites of intersecting practices, which overtly emphasize... legitimising the asking for and giving of reasons for interpretations and suggestions" (2017, p. 10). The findings above suggest the possibilities that such an institutional culture does not exist or that the participants have not had sufficient opportunities to collaborate with each other and unearth their deeper values and motivations. Support for the latter is provided by an additional finding: many participants stated that the specific project in question provided opportunities to learn about what matters to their colleagues because both the large scale of the project and the experimental nature of the exhibits necessitated greater inter-departmental collaboration than usual. As one participant noted,

"I worked with all the people on that list pretty much on a regular basis for other exhibitions except for the curators, and so it was a delight to discover that they were very aligned in the same values that we have in education around the approachability of like what we're putting on view and the inclusiveness that we are trying to achieve with this reinstallation." (Participant 12)

Another participant explained,

"When we're thinking about where to install some interpretive technology in the galleries, you know the perspective of the designers [is] really thinking about, like, what, visually, the screens look like in the space with the objects, and that's not something I would, you know, sort of prioritize in the same way, but, like, really learning from them, like, what is it- you know, what does it mean to have the screens in the space, and how does that change the visual experience of the viewer

and the way they move through the galleries ...”
(Participant 2)

A final consideration in relation to Edwards’ work is that Edwards and colleagues have focused mainly on highly distributed collaborations involving multiple governmental and private agencies; these collaborations are often unprecedented, and the collaborators have often never worked with the other kinds of professionals involved, let alone the individuals. In contrast, while the collaborations involved in this project were in a sense new and involved many individuals who had not previously worked together, there is a significant and deeply rooted body of historically developed cultural norms and organizing structures associated with museums in general and this institution specifically. The findings outlined above suggest that that these norms and structures may inhibit the development of what Edwards, following Derry (2013), refers to as “a space of reasons” (2017, p. 10). At the same time, participants’ discussion of learning moments and references to actions of their colleagues point to the counter-acting potential inherent in exhibit development projects that bring together individuals who have not worked together before. Importantly, in discussing those learning moments, and in general discussion of what they think matters to their colleagues, participants’ descriptions were almost universally infused with admiration, respect, and appreciation for the unique and highly individual contributions of their colleagues.

3) What factors do museum professionals cite as important to successful collaboration?

In order to better understand how what matters to museum professionals positions them for collaboration, participants were asked to reflect upon factors they consider important to collaborating successfully. Participants’ responses to other questions were also mined for insights relevant to this question. Five major themes emerged, in which participants i) named a wide range of individuals as key to the success of the project, ii) cited project management and leadership as particularly important, iii) highlighted collective buy-in to a shared vision, iv) emphasized the importance of communication and asking questions, and v) called out the importance of understanding the project at hand as part of a larger trajectory of projects.

Wide range of individuals involved

Participants were recruited on a rolling basis, starting from a list of 15 individuals derived from an email chain consisting of individuals who met for regular meetings during the project. During interviews, participants were asked whether there were individuals important to the success of the project who were not part of the original list. After 13 interviews, the list had grown to 25 individuals. Individuals added to the list often came from departments not represented on the initial list, from development to communications and marketing to information technology. Many participants noted the importance of both a scholarly advisory group and community advisory group. Other non-staff named included outside contractors and artists. Finally, several participants advocated for the inclusion of visitors as collaborators, stating, for example,

“Collaboration has to do with a lot more people than the staff; it has to do with all of the people who contributed or molded and threw those ideas back and forth right from the beginning... I know that there was some sort of prototyping of interpretive material... and that to me is also a kind of collaboration.” (Participant 8)

Project Management and Leadership

When reflecting on what matters to their colleagues, participants often noted the critical contributions those colleagues made to the specific project in question. Two contributors were named especially often as critical to the success of the project. Many participants spoke of the contributions of an individual whose main role was project management:

“[NAME REDACTED], oh, my goodness, we would never have done this project [without them]...They really brought this whole group together, I think, in terms of managing this project from the curatorial side and following up with, you know, what updates had occurred, what sort of things needed to be resolved, and providing status updates to all the stakeholders.” (Participant 11)

Another participant said,

“I think another new process was having very regular full team meetings across divisions that were very well project managed by [NAME REDACTED]. Project

management is tricky, I'd say, in museums in general, though I haven't really seen what happens [elsewhere], but at [INSTITUTION REDACTED], like, there are no, or very few, jobs that have that as their sole focus. And so [NAME REDACTED] really served as that person that really made sure that all the different pieces across the museum departments were on track and collaborating effectively, and so, and they primarily did that, through these meetings ... but we did that from the outset, and I think that really set up a lot of buy-in across all the divisions for making sure everybody's respective projects were successful." (Participant 12)

Many participants also spoke of the importance of leadership. One participant explained the facilitative role a senior team member played:

"[NAME REDACTED] was along for the ride to make sure that the curators wouldn't get too hung up on any one theme or thought. They were a senior [team member] at the time...they were really great at walking the line between curatorial and design, knowing both of our needs. They knew where [we] are coming from, but they also understood what the curators were trying to say...so they were very instrumental in keeping everybody kind of in line." (Participant 5)

Another participant highlighted the advocative and empowering role that same senior team member played:

"I think leadership matters. In addition to all these like more on-the-ground players that are on your list...a lot of it had the time and space and resources to happen productively or effectively because of the leaders that were in place leading up to that project like [NAME REDACTED]." (Participant 12)

Importance of collective buy-in to a shared vision

Many participants referenced a shared vision as critical to the success of the project. One participant recalled,

"...The exciting part was that [at the] general meetings when you go in and you have a bunch of you know 10 people, 15 people around a table, and I have never

been in a place that listened and respected one another's opinions in such a real way...[The curators] had both, or their areas, had huge footprints and yet they wanted to...do something that basically shrank their personal fiefdoms...You know, that's tough and rare, and that was really, really special in that everybody was on board with it." (Participant 8)

One participant even noted the role that a physical model of the museum played in externalizing that vision:

"Collaboration, you know, usually it arises because of mutual interest ... [You have to] make sure that there is a high level of dialogue and that it's clear, that there is a clear goal and that the outcome can be envisioned ... keeping the big picture in mind, making sure that everybody agrees on the goal and then asking questions all the way along...[Within this project specifically] you had to just kind of keep your eye on the big picture, and working with the physical model down in the basement was really helpful because you- that was a very graphic way of reminding yourself that it was the whole thing not just this little, you know, thing..." (Participant 13)

Communication and asking questions

Many participants spoke of the importance of communication in collaborative work. One participant simply stated as the most important key to successful collaboration that "you have to not pretend that [challenges] don't exist. You have to have the conversation" (Participant 13). Other participants spoke directly to the project in question and noted the importance of the greater frequency with which meetings were held relative to usual exhibition development projects, as well as the inclusion of a greater diversity of staff included in those meetings:

"We met very, very regularly, which ... is not a way that typically exhibitions work right now ... So, in that sense it really did - the consistency of those meetings and that communication really created an environment to bring up questions, to communicate better..." (Participant 3)

This participant went on to link the issue of communication to the establishment and maintenance of a shared vision:

“It was really great to learn what other people are doing, ... how my work fits within this larger puzzle. I think, for me, anyway, it really gave me a sense of purpose that, without this working group, no longer exists because, you know, there were certain shared goals, I think, and without this kind of process...We don't have them anymore, which I am actually struggling with not having those touch points, I guess.” (Participant 3)

Situating projects within a larger trajectory

Several participants explained that situating this project within a larger trajectory of the museum's work served to reduce tension in decision-making. As one participant put it,

“I think we were overall quite happy with it, and we were very aware ... that nobody had done this before, and so, even if it wasn't perfect, it was an important experiment for colleagues to be able to come see and think about. ... We also knew that it's not a final thing because we have...a very fragile collection, and so we knew that conservation changes would be coming, and if you don't get what you want this first time, you know, we're going to have the opportunity to show that next time.” (Participant 13)

Another participant stressed the importance of keeping the future in mind not only in order to facilitate work on this project but to document learning for future projects:

“Also, I think, personally, always keeping in mind, you know, this isn't the only time we're going to do a [project] like this, so keeping in mind these major decisions and, just, like, the overall schedule and timeline of how we were working documenting a lot of that process is important to me for future projects like this...” (Participant 7)

These themes suggest that many of the ways museum professionals already think about collaboration map well to Edwards' larger framing around the concepts of *relationality* and *what matters*. Specifically, the

first four themes speak to an understanding of the relational aspects of collaboration, and the last three themes speak to an understanding of the importance of collective alignment around what matters to individuals. Combined with the findings outlined above in relation to the development of common knowledge of what matters to each other, these findings suggest that although significant common knowledge does not seem to exist, there does exist latent potential for its development, and for the application of Edwards' concepts as tools for the cultivation thereof.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how what matters to museum professionals positions them for collaboration, and to situate this understanding in relation to persisting stereotypes that portray collaboration amongst museum professionals as an uphill battle. The findings relating to museum professionals' articulations of what matters to them paint a picture that contrasts starkly with those stereotypes. In this case, the museum in question was filled with people who were simply excited to be a part of it all, working directly with art, artists, and curators, and supporting each other's work in ways that leveraged their individual strengths, experiences, and forms of expertise. The multidimensional motivations described by participants contained both consequential divergence within departments and significant overlaps across departments. Furthermore, it is significant that participants' motivations were grounded not in abstract, conceptual ideals but in deeply meaningful life experiences, often stretching back as far as childhood.

Several features of this alternative perspective on how museum professionals may be positioned for collaboration stand out in relation to the literature, including its human-centeredness, the open-endedness and generality of the motivations, and the compatibility and overlap between them. Values have received significant attention in the museology literature but are most often conceptualized at an institutional level and utilizing interpretive frameworks that impose abstract, dichotomous conceptual schemes relating to, for example, functions a museum might fulfill (Anderson, 2012; Davies et al., 2013; Villeneuve, 2019). This study sought not to categorize complex and varied human motivations along a few dichotomous axes, but rather to convey the complexity of participants' responses as much as possible, identifying themes not to sort responses but to identify common points of connection. The perspective that emerges suggests that the

motivations driving museum professionals may be more general, open, compatible, and overlapping than is often assumed.

This perspective both broadly aligns with recent calls for more human-centered (Murawski, 2018; Whitaker, 2021) and relational museum practices (Truels & Fisher, 2021) and more specifically demonstrates that some museum professionals already conceptualize their work in a deeply relational way. This perspective also demonstrates the potential of a positive approach to research by highlighting previously under-appreciated positive phenomena associated with collaboration in museums, as well as providing an alternative perspective on negative aspects of collaboration, complementing Lee's (2007) work reframing conflict as a site of learning across communities of practice. Lee works to disarm the negative perception of conflict in collaborative exhibition development by demonstrating that it is often the result of ignorance or insufficient understanding of collaborators' practices rather than malicious or egotistical intent. Following Edwards (2017), the present study focused on understanding practitioners' perspectives not on the mechanics of *how* collaborators do their work but *why*, and in doing so reveals significant common ground for leveraging the types of conflicts Lee describes as opportunities for generative learning, not only facilitating more effective collaboration in the moment but complexifying collective interpretations of the problem spaces in which museum professionals work.

Turning to participants' understandings of what matters to each other, the key finding is that participants do not explicitly discuss what matters with each other but rather seem to learn or infer what matters to each other through working together. As noted earlier, Edwards (2017) herself emphasizes that common knowledge of what matters

“is created over time in interactions in sites of intersecting practices, which overtly emphasize... similar long-term open goals, ... revealing specific professional values and motives in discussions, by legitimizing asking for and giving reasons for interpretations and suggestions, [and] listening to, recognizing and engaging with the values and motives of others” (p. 10).

This suggests several possible explanations for the present study's findings, one being a lack of sufficient opportunities to collaborate across departments as they did on this project. Support for this possibility is provided by participants' identification of learning moments within the project. And while one participant noted the unusual degree to which team members “listened and respected one

another's opinions," it is possible either that this experience was not widely shared or, more likely, that the unique circumstances of the project demanded the creation of a more robust "space of reasons," wherein "the asking for and giving of reasons are expected" (Edwards, 2017, p. 10), than usually exists in the wider institution. Finally, participants may indeed have deep and nuanced but tacit understanding of what matters to each other that is difficult to articulate in words.

Findings relating to participants' perceptions of factors important to collaboration can be subsumed under two main themes: relationality and grounding in what matters. Regarding relationality, participants cited a wide range of individuals as important to the success of the project, in particular individuals whose work primarily involved coordinating and facilitating collaboration, and stressed the importance of communication and asking questions. These findings support McKenna-Cress and Kamien's (2013) utilization of the concept of *advocacy positions* within exhibition development, and support calls for the application of systems thinking in museum work in recognition of its distributed, collaborative, and interdependent nature (Jung & Love, 2017).

The importance of communication and asking questions also connects with participants' identification of the importance of a shared vision and bigger-picture view of the larger trajectory of work. Together, these phenomena relate broadly to grounding in what matters collectively. While the criticality of a shared vision in collaboration and organization change is well-established (Fleming, 2013; Janes, 2013), the present study highlights the power of a shared vision that emerges authentically from within practitioners' work. Further, it is noteworthy that participants described physical models of the space and art objects themselves as artifacts that helped ground them in a larger vision, as well as citing the frequent project meetings as a structure that encouraged communication and the asking of questions. These ideas point to the role of mediating artifacts and processes in the development of common knowledge of what matters (Edwards, 2017; Lee, 2007), and to the potential exhibition development holds as a source of expansive organizational learning, due especially to its cyclical nature and its situation at the intersection of so many other museum practices (Korn et al., 2021; Villaespesa & Álvarez, 2020).

This study asked a small sample of museum professionals to reflect on what matters to them in their work, and on their perceptions of what matters to their peers. As such, it relied upon both the willingness and the ability of participants to reflect deeply and accurately. Participants'

willingness to share deeply may have been adversely affected by the following factors: (a) all but one participant had no prior relationship to the researcher, (b) the subject matter may be perceived as sensitive, and (c) although responses were anonymized, it is likely that at least some participants were cognizant of the possibility that other participants might infer the speaker of a quote considering the small sample size. In such a case, participants' responses may have been heavily influenced by potential consequences for their working relationships, especially given differences in participants' positions of power within the institution. Further, participants were asked to reflect on the topic specifically in relation to a project which, although it occurred within the past decade, was completed some years ago, and may therefore have been unable to recall certain details or aspects of their experience of the project. Finally, participants were recruited opportunistically; it is possible that those who agreed to an interview felt differently about the project than those who did not.

Implications

For Research

Due to the limitations of this exploratory study, which relied on self-reporting of a small sample size of participants from a single project, further studies utilizing a greater mix of methods, undertaken in-situ both at the micro-level of interactions and macro-level of whole projects, and including a wider range of participants beyond staff, would be valuable to build a better understanding of the role of what matters to participants in collaborative museum work. Future studies might seek to elucidate factors associated with the development of organizational and team cultures in which practitioners engage in discussion about what matters to each other. In particular, studies might investigate the mediating processes and tools that generate and facilitate discussion of what matters. Future studies might also explore individual and collective motivations and values specifically as they relate to the development of new practices.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates the potential value of a positive approach to museological research. In particular, the perspective developed through this study, where the collective values driving a museum's work emerge from individuals' motivations and values as they drive day-to-day work, may be worth further development as an alternative and complement to more top-down, institution-centered

conceptualizations of museum values abstract from day-to-day activities of the individuals who constitute the institution.

For Practice

The findings of this study suggest that there may be significant potential for individual museum professionals to intentionally seek opportunities to engage with each other in conversations about what matters to each other in their work. Specifically, practitioners might leverage moments of disagreement or misunderstanding over challenges within their work to ask about and discuss the deeper reasons why they would advocate for one particular approach over another. Organizationally, museums may focus on creating spaces and opportunities for conversation and learning about what matters to individuals, both at a general level to build baseline understanding and especially as a framing device in the context of disagreements.

Further, where possible, museum professionals may approach specific projects as opportunities to forge new connections and work with people they haven't before. This can also be done at an organizational level. While many museum operations can potentially be carried out more collaboratively, exhibit development specifically holds great potential to be a site for experiments with and development of more collaborative, silo-disrupting practices. Importantly, the results of this study highlight the criticality to this process of roles dedicated to project management, as well as the need for leadership that advocates for and supports the dedication of time and resources necessary to more collaborative approaches.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who participated in my study for the deeply insightful and enjoyable conversations; I hope I've honored each of your contributions. Thank you to my thesis committee, Kira Schabram and Katie Headrick-Taylor, for your invaluable insights and encouragement, and to my thesis committee chair, Jessica Luke, for your endless patience and enthusiasm, generosity of time and spirit, and persistence in helping me wrestle a giant "grizzly bear" of an idea into a study appropriate to the scope of a master's thesis. Thanks, Mom and Dad, for making it possible for me to live a life involving museum school, and thank you, Shaterra, for blessing me every day with your infinite beauty, love, kindness, and joy.

References

- Anderson, G. (2012). A framework: Reinventing the museum. *Reinventing the museum: The evolving conversation on the paradigm shift*, 1-10.
- Ash, D. (2014). Positioning informal learning research in museums within activity theory: From theory to practice and back again. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 57(1), 107-118.
- Bushe, G. R., & Marshak, R. J. (2014). Dialogic organization development. *The NTL handbook of organization development and change*, 193-211.
- Cameron, K. S., & Spreitzer, G. M. (Eds.). (2012). *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship*. OUP USA.
- Carmeli, A., Brueller, D., & Dutton, J. (2009). Learning behaviors in the workplace: The role of high-quality interpersonal relationships and psychological safety. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 26, 81-98.
- Cornelissen, J. P., & Werner, M. D. (2014). Putting framing in perspective: A review of framing and frame analysis across the management and organizational literature. *Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1), 181-235.
- Davies, S. M., Paton, R., & O'Sullivan, T. J. (2013). The museum values framework: a framework for understanding organisational culture in museums. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 28(4), 345-361.
- Derry, J. (2013). Can inferentialism contribute to social epistemology? *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, 47(2), 222-235.
- Dutton, J. E., & Ragins, B. R. (Eds.). (2017). *Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation*. Psychology Press.
- Edwards, A. (Ed.). (2017). *Working relationally in and across practices: A cultural-historical approach to collaboration*. Cambridge University Press.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of management review*, 14(4), 532-550.
- Fleming, D. (2013). The essence of the museum: mission, values, vision. *The international handbooks of museum studies*, 3-25.

- Haupt, G., Bequette, M., Goetze, M., & Her, C. (2022). '... Yet, it is still very White': structural and cultural impediments to DEI change in science museums. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 1-18.
- Heynoski, K., & Quinn, R.E. (2012). Seeing and realizing organizational potential: Activating conversations that challenge assumptions. *Organizational Dynamics*, 41(2), 118-125.
- Janes, R. R. (2013). *Museums and the Paradox of Change*. Routledge.
- Jung, Y., & Love, A.R. (2017). *Systems thinking in museums : Theory and practice*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Knudsen, L. V., & Olesen, A. R. (2018). Complexities of collaborating: Understanding and managing differences in collaborative design of museum communication. In *The Routledge Handbook of Museums, Media and Communication*(pp. 205-218). Routledge.
- Korn, R., Chandler, K., & Marzec, C. (2021). Becoming a Learning Organization. *Curator (New York, N.Y.)*, 64(2), 297-311.
- Latham, K., & Simmons, John E. (2014). *Foundations of museum studies : Evolving systems of knowledge*. Santa Barbara, California: Libraries Unlimited, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC.
- Lee, C. (2007). Reconsidering Conflict in Exhibition Development Teams. *Museum Management and Curatorship (1990)*, 22(2), 183-199.
- McCall, V., & Gray, C. (2014). Museums and the 'new museology': Theory, practice and organisational change. *Museum Management and Curatorship (1990)*, 29(1), 19-35.
- McKenna-Cress, P., & Kamien, J. (2013). *Creating exhibitions: Collaboration in the planning, development, and design of innovative experiences*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Merritt, E., & Fogarty, L. (2021, February 26). *Flower Power: A Story of Organizational Re-Blossoming*. American Alliance of Museums. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.aam-us.org/2013/08/13/flower-power-a-story-of-organizational-re-blossoming/>.
- Morgan, J. (2013). Examining the 'flexible museum': exhibition process, a project approach, and the creative element. *museum and society*, 11(2), 158-171.
- Murawski, M. (2018, February 18). *Towards a more human-centered museum: Part 1, rethinking hierarchies*. Art Museum Teaching. Retrieved April 21, 2022, from <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2018/01/22/rethinking-hierarchies/>

- Newman, A., Donohue, R., & Eva, N. (2017). Psychological safety: A systematic review of the literature. *Human Resource Management Review*, 27(3), 521-535.
- Putnam, L. L., & Fairhurst, G. T. (2001). Discourse analysis in organizations. *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research and methods*, 78-136.
- Patton, M. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods : Integrating theory and practice* (Fourth ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.
- Reich, C. (2016). Bridging Research and Practice through Organizational Learning. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 59(4), 331-337.
- Schonfeld, R. C., & Sweeney, L. (2019). Organizing the work of the art museum. *Ithaca S+ R*.
- Siggelkow, N. (2007). Persuasion with case studies. *Academy of management journal*, 50(1), 20-24.
- Toohey, J. M., & Wolins, I. S. (1993). Beyond the turf battles: Creating effective curator-educator partnerships. *Journal of Museum Education*, 18(1), 4-6.
- Torres, R. T., & Preskill, H. (2001). Evaluation and organizational learning: Past, present, and future. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 22(3), 387-395.
- Truels, T., & Fisher, J. (2021). How We Learned to Question Everything. *The Journal of Museum Education : Roundtable Reports.*, 46(4), 519-530.
- Vagnone, F. D. (2021, October 28). *Running with scissors: Creating a sustainable history experience (2017-2020)*. American Alliance of Museums. Retrieved April 28, 2022, from <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/11/09/financial-sustainability-old-salem-museum-and-gardens/>
- Villaespesa, E., & Álvarez, A. (2020). Visitor journey mapping at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza: bringing cross-departmental collaboration to build a holistic and integrated visitor experience. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35(2), 125-142.
- Villeneuve, P. (2019). Considering Competing Values in Art Museum Exhibition Curation. *Stedelijk Studies*.
- Ward, S. J. (2018). Interconnected impact: using CHAT to understand art museums as systems. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 33(2), 178-194.

Weick, K. E. (2007). The generative properties of richness. *Academy of management journal*, 50(1), 14-19.

Whitaker, A. (2021). Reconsidering people as the institution: Empathy, pay equity, and deaccessioning as key leadership strategies in art museums. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 64(2), 253-268.

Interview Guide

Appendix

Individual Role and What Matters to You as a Professional (15-20 min.)

- a. **What brought you to museum work?** Why were you interested in working in a museum?
- b. **What brought you to the position you're in now?**
 - i. How long have you been at this institution?
 - ii. What, if any, roles have you held previously in this institution?
 - iii. What, briefly, is your role now? (and, if different, what was it at the time of the reinstallation project?) (seeking both job title and core activities...)
- c. Of all the jobs you could do in a museum, **why this job?**
 - i. What do you enjoy most about your work?
 - ii. What impact do you hope your work has?
 - iii. Within your role, what do you wish you could do more of or do differently?

Brief Overview of Reinstallation Project and its goals (5-10 min.)

- d. Why was this project initiated?
- e. What were some of the **main goals** for this project?
 - i. Compared to the general goals for exhibit development at the institution more broadly, were there any goals that were unique to this project?
 - ii. To what extent was it a goal of this project to develop or redefine working relationships within and/or beyond the institution?

- f. Were there any **goals that you personally had** for the project or things you hoped would be accomplished through it? Or, were any of the goals already discussed especially important to you?

Your collaborators and what matters to them (20-30 min.)

Example Person
General Role: example
Role in this project: example
What matters to them in general: example
What mattered to them in this project: example

In this section, we'll use a collaborative digital workspace called Miro to organize our discussion about your understanding of what matters to each of your collaborators. In the end, we'll have a "card" [see example at left, in actual interview participant will be viewing Miro board filled with such cards] for each individual involved in the project that will include

information on their general role and their role in this project specifically, as well as your understanding of their motivations in their broader work and in this project specifically.

- g. To start, we have 20 individuals I'm told were involved in the project, along with their roles. Before we go any further, do you believe the roles listed for each individual are accurate?
- i. Are there any other individuals that were involved in the project, whether formally or informally, that are not listed here? It's ok if you can't think of anyone. We can always add more people as we go.
- h. Now let's move on to understanding what matters to each of your collaborators, both in their larger role and in this project specifically.
- i. Let's start with you. In the first several minutes of this interview, we discussed various aspects of what matters to you as a museum professional. I'll bring up the list of questions I asked in case it helps you recall what we talked about, and I'd like

you to do your best to **summarize what matters to you** in your work.

- ii. Let's move on to the specific project. **Were there any specific goals or hopes you had for the project?** Was there anything different or more specific than what you said matters to you in general that mattered to you in this project?
- iii. We'll now do the same for everyone else on this list. So far as time allows, for each individual, I'll ask you to give your best understanding of what matters to them in their work. It's ok if this is a guess and you're not really sure. I'll also ask if you're aware of anything that mattered for them specific to this project. Again, it's ok if this is a guess or if you don't know. Let's start with individuals in whom you're most confident you can characterize what matters to them.
 1. For context, how would you characterize your working relationship with [individual], both in general and within this project specifically? How closely would you say you work with them, and what kind of work do you collaborate with them on?
 2. What would you say **matters to them in their work in general?**
 3. Was there anything you know of that **mattered to them in this project specifically?**

Concluding Reflection (2-5 min.)

- i. I'd like step back now and reflect on everything we've discussed in the last 50 minutes. Looking across these cards and the things that matter to you and your collaborators, I wonder if there's anything you notice or wonder, or if there's anything that has occurred to you throughout this interview that you'd like to voice?
- j. Lastly, we've talked a lot about what matters to yourself and your collaborators, and in the process we've talked a bit about aspects of the project that facilitated

collaboration. Are there any other factors you believe are really important to successful collaboration?