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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to share highlights of a professional development workshop aimed at helping museum educators build capacity for difficult dialogues on race with adults. Public pedagogy affords museum educators a unique role in adult education as they facilitate adult learning on social justice issues. But in sharing with adults about the scope and elements of race-related objects, they may fear or be unable to manage the kinds of emotions that could be evoked. Consequently, they may hesitate to fully engage in what could be a rich learning moment. The workshop was designed to explore characteristics of adults as learners and featured discourse and activities around a recently developed "8S" framework for educators who often engage in race talk.

Résumé

L'objectif du présent article est de partager les points saillants d'un atelier de développement professionnel visant à aider le personnel éducatif de musée à élargir leurs capacités d'animer des dialogues difficiles sur la race avec les adultes. La pédagogie publique permet à ce groupe d'assumer un rôle unique dans l'éducation adulte quant à l'enseignement des enjeux de justice sociale. Toutefois, les discussions sur l'étendue et les caractéristiques des objets liés à la race peuvent inciter la peur ou encore l'incapacité de gérer les émotions suscitées. Par conséquent, le personnel éducatif peut hésiter à s'engager pleinement dans ce qui pourrait être une riche expérience d'apprentissage. L'atelier est conçu pour permettre l'exploration des caractéristiques d'adultes en situation d'apprentissage et se penche sur les activités et les discours associés au cadre « 8S » récemment créé pour le personnel éducatif qui aborde fréquemment les questions de race.

In the United States, museum adult educators can play unique and powerful roles in terms of interrogating, challenging, and educating for social justice (e.g., Alston, 2016; Cross, 2017; Flanagan, 2016). Indeed, their roles in these critical sites of public pedagogy as facilitators of adult learning are well established (e.g., Clover, Sanford, Bell, & Johnson, 2016; Dudzinska-Przesmitzki & Grenier, 2008). But given a gruelling, racialized

US history, museum educators may inevitably encounter potentially difficult conversations concerning race and racism while on tour. A significant challenge for many who facilitate *race talk* is the double role of managing their learners' resistance and emotions and their own sometimes challenging personal tensions or reactions (Murray-Johnson & Ross-Gordon, 2018).

In this article, I reflect on a workshop designed to explore the kinds of emotional management strategies that might be useful for museum educators facilitating potentially difficult talks on race-related art projects in museums. I am an adult educator of colour in US academia, passionate about exploring facilitator-focused strategies for race talk in formal and non-formal learning spaces. I begin with a brief overview of literature relevant to the workshop, describe its origins and development, then conclude with lessons learned and practical implications.

Difficult Dialogues on Race and Emotions

It is undisputed that race-related discourses, or what is often known as race talk, are considered touchy or taboo in a US context. Though not always the case, a number of educators of adults have conceded that the process can be "difficult" or risky, especially given its associated emotional tensions (e.g., Brookfield, 2018; Isaac, Merriweather, & Rogers, 2010). Difficult dialogues on race have been defined as "potentially threatening conversations or interactions between members of different racial and ethnic groups, that reveal major differences in worldviews…are found to be offensive…arouse intense emotions…[and] disrupt communication and behaviours" (Sue, 2013, pp. 664–665). Indeed, race talk in general has been considered both intensely intellectual and intensely emotional (e.g., Brookfield, 2018; Wang, 2008). Descriptions like these suggest that race talk can be as emotionally laden for educators as it is for learner-participants. Consequently, some adult educators default to polite avoidance, hesitation, or fear of engaging in authentic race-related discourses altogether.

Neither the diverse tensions and challenges linked to talking about race, nor the need to strategize for these challenges are strangers to museum learning. As Dewhurst and Hendrick (2017) observed during anti-racist museum workshop initiatives they designed, "People are nervous to talk about race with colleagues [and] there is confusion about where and when it is appropriate to talk about race" (p. 103). They went on to say that "silence is the pervasive default in response to racism," and they called for practitioners to be given "examples and tools for anti-racist pedagogy" (p. 103). Recently, strategies and approaches for race-talk practitioners have increased (e.g., Brookfield, 2018; Harper & Hendrick, 2017; Sue, 2016; Tolerance.org, 2018). Among other things, several of these sources touch in some way on the idea of building one's "emotive capacity" for race talk. Manglitz, Guy, and Merriweather (2014) described emotive capacity as "the ability to hold one's own [challenging] emotional responses, while listening to others who are just as emotionally laden" (p. 113). These researchers concluded that since one will inevitably experience challenging emotions during racial discourse, cognitive or intellectual capacity is insufficient. Although they explored the concept of emotive capacity as it concerns instructors of colour, I have found the concept both useful and meaningful to consider for varied ethnicities. For instance, my qualitative work exploring multi-ethnic instructors' facilitation of race talk suggested instructional strategies explicitly planned for adult learners

(fishbowls, Socratic circles, journaling, discussions, and so on) needs to be complemented by more explicit strategies for the personal or emotional tensions that may result from those very activities (Murray-Johnson & Ross-Gordon, 2018).

As I contemplated issues and solutions relative to emotive strategies, I started developing a practical framework that facilitators in formal and non-formal learning spaces might use before, during, and after race talk (see Murray-Johnson, 2019). This tool (called the 8S framework), aimed to provide guidance for practitioners to try to manage, rather than avoid, moments of tension or discomfort that, as suggested earlier, are often characteristic of authentic race talk. While working on the framework for college faculty, I received an invitation to explore it with a group of museum educators. This invitation was important, because "scholarship points to the need for museums to engage race [as] in remaining silent on these issues, museums jeopardize their credibility" (Brown, 2015, p. 110). Gaining insights from a workshop using emerging strategies for difficult race talk can then be important in helping museum educators who are intimidated by the discourse build emotive capacity for authentic dialogue, toward the kind of transformational learning and change that museums have the capacity to promote.

Workshop Background and Context

The workshop, entitled "Facilitating Difficult Race Based Art Projects: Considerations for Adults," welcomed approximately 32 part-time docents and six full-time educators from City Museum[1] in the northeast region of the United States. Most identified as Caucasian. Though the museum is situated in the heart of the city's downtown district, where diverse racial/ethnic groups reside, its adult visitor groups tend to be mostly Caucasian and middle to upper socio-economic class. Museum staff had been working on increasing diversity-related art exhibits in recent years, toward (1) fostering a more social justice–oriented learning space, subsequently eliciting more authentic conversations about the historical and contemporary realities of racism in America; (2) increasing adult visitors' knowledge base on social justice issues year-round; and (3) bringing a greater level of visibility to the history and narratives of marginalized groups. City Museum was also anticipating a potentially "controversial" international exhibit with dominant racial themes close to the time of my invitation. Educators felt docents could benefit from specific training on race-talk facilitation with adults (as learners) as part of the preparation.

Workshop Development

My approach was threefold here: identify the need, facilitate an adult learning–oriented session on the basis of that need, and evaluate impact. To identify need, I toured the museum as a visitor, then met with full-time staff. I listened, then queried where necessary to create a concept map that might indicate existing gaps between the perceived issues around race-based work in the museum and desired learning goals. Museum educators seemed committed to showcasing social justice art projects and to encouraging adults to learn through active engagement in the experience embodied by that project—even the ones that might provoke negative emotions. Still, most were uncertain about how prepared docents were for moments of tension.

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1   City Museum is a pseudonym.

As an outgrowth of that meeting, I designed and disseminated a brief electronic pre-workshop survey. Responses were anonymous and yielded a 72% response rate. I learned that while docents seemed confident about the facts or intricacies of a given piece, they were concerned about strategies for starting a conversation around a thought-provoking race-related project and/or engaging adult audiences during moments that evoked strong emotion. The responses were diverse and spoke to issues such as developing "comfort" when talking about uncomfortable works, dealing with verbosity (e.g., confronting an opinionated guest), and maintaining balance in facilitating adults (between sharing content and stimulating their observations, reactions, and feelings).

Conducting the Workshop

The workshop consisted of two segments with a break in between. After an icebreaker and group norms set-up, part one explored characteristics of adult learners using Malcolm Knowles's (1984) concept of andragogy and a related video clip. The clip described each of andragogy's central tenets or assumptions with sample scenarios from adult-focused learning spaces. Specifically, adults tend to be self-motivated, self-directed, and goal-oriented, possess valuable prior knowledge, and welcome practicality, relevance, and respect (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Participants then engaged in small-group brainstorming and brief role play of how andragogy's assumptions about adult learners might apply in everyday museum tours. Although andragogy has been critiqued (e.g., concerning its lack of criticality and lack of emphasis on multiple ways of knowing), it remains an important lens through which to view and understand adults as learners, and is still acknowledged as a helpful foundation in several US adult training and education settings. Andragogy provided a particularly simple and meaningful starting point for my workshop audience, because they were preparing to facilitate adult learning with little to no formal training in adult education.

In part two of the workshop, I gave each participant a copy of the 8S framework mentioned earlier (the facilitator-focused tool developed for managing self in race talk). The goals were (1) for us to explore descriptions of the framework's eight elements: self-awareness, sensitivity, sanctuary, solid relationships, speech, separation, shedding, and sacrifice; and (2) for museum staff to reflect on themselves as race-talk facilitators in relation to each element. As we engaged in conversation about the framework, I shared my own related experiences, as necessary; invited participants to make personal connections through note taking, questioning, or example sharing; and invited connections to andragogy's assumptions. Figure 1 shows the framework's elements, followed by highlights of the conversation it yielded.

Self-awareness involves knowing oneself, layered identities, and how that might impact the dialogue. In teaching, I ask myself: What are my "hot buttons"? If someone says something offensive relative to my identity as a person of colour, how might I react? How does my audience makeup implicitly affect how I facilitate? Am I engaging equitably? What implicit biases or privileges might I carry or might evoke my reactions? While museum educators would not normally have an extended knowledge of each visitor, a useful assumption comes into play: adults come equipped with significant *prior knowledge and experience*. Using open questions, for instance, to get a sense of who participants are vis-à-vis their interests and *motivations* concerning the exhibit could elicit information that would help with the dialogue.
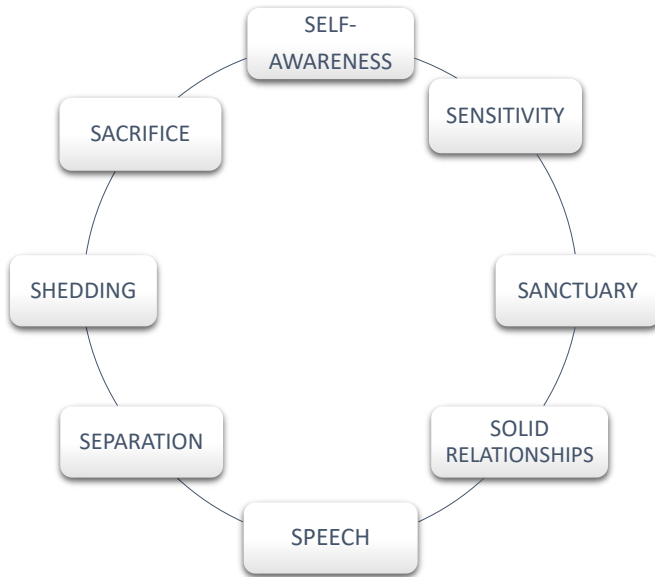
Figure 1. 8S framework (Murray-Johnson, 2019).

Sensitivity involves gauging the space and conversation with full presence. I might ask myself: When might things be "too much" for my participants of colour, for instance, who often are at the centre of oppression discourse? When things get quiet, do I speak up? Why or why not? How well am I reading both verbal and non-verbal communications? What change in my facilitation might result? Andragogy's assumption about adults welcoming *respect* is a useful reminder here. Being able to respond appropriately in the moment will begin to foster a level of respect for their space, freedom of choice, and trust. In fact, sharing thoughts about tensions an art object might evoke (including ones experienced by the facilitators)—without assuming the same of any one person—may help with a participant's sense of belonging in that space. If docents say explicitly that the moment is sensitive and that is part of the experience, some may have a sense of relief in knowing they are not alone in wrestling with a personal tension and be more open to fully engage in the experience.

Sanctuary involves having a small informal group of confidential others to be honest with about our fears (such as saying the wrong thing), concerns, challenges, and successes in the process of learning to engage difficult moments in race talk. The group should be honest enough to affirm us and equally call us out respectfully if there are areas for improvement.

Solid relationships involve intentionally honing friendships that are diverse in nature and that we can learn from. I encouraged our group to think about their circle of friends, the level of diversity represented, and action steps to be taken if their circle seemed monocultural. We can learn about cross-racial issues so much more if we intentionally engage others who are different from us. The practice of engaging multiple perspectives could translate to how we tour; it should keep our dialogues relevant and enhance our ability to acknowledge prior knowledge and skills.

Speech involves knowing what to say—verbally or non-verbally—and when or how; it works closely with sensitivity. During race talk, speech often means using inquiry to hear

others' thoughts and interpretations, rather than talking constantly—connecting the factual historical "dots," for example, to a related and effective experience, story, or contemporary issue is crucial. It definitely does not mean speaking on behalf of—or asking someone to speak on behalf of—an entire race or ethnic group. Though silence is generally interpreted as negative or not "speaking up" for social justice, sometimes it also means leaving a quiet tension hanging so that visitors have processing time. Along with *respect* and valuing of their *prior experiences*, andragogy's assumption concerning *relevance* and keeping things *practical* is important here.

Separation involves not taking things (too) personally. When preparing for or engaging in difficult moments, it remains important to avoid dwelling on the challenge of resistance or negative reactions in such a way that it paralyzes our ability to facilitate. Andragogy's assumptions tell us adults are *goal-oriented* and this potentially helps focus difficult moments while providing a sense of separation. For example, during our discussion on this, we shared that docents might strive to establish brief co-constructed goals for the tour and stick to them. It is easy to get sidetracked in tense moments, but acknowledging those moments as part of the process and encouraging others to link them to the overall goals of the experience (separating psychologically rather than taking a personal reaction, which promotes negative stress) are key. Additionally, we are all at different places in our understanding; various elements are at play given each person's world view—elements we often cannot control.

Shedding involves unlearning what we might have held true. Much of this is personal introspection and interrogation. It also happens by being willing to learn from others on tour. Alongside challenging my levels of self-awareness by examining identity intersections and how this might influence race talk and related content knowledge, I try to shed the "all-knowing expert" label because of how personal and nuanced race talk can be. We should dare to challenge ourselves not to be afraid to ask further open-ended questions, to welcome perspectives that might broaden our own, to say "I don't know," "I'd have to give that some more thought," or "I also wrestle with that." Doing this begins to reposition our learning space as a necessary site of struggle where we are all learning together. We highlighted this as an important link to acknowledging *prior learning* in adults and ensuring *respect*.

Sacrifice involves intentional willingness to take a risk, even in the face of fear. The issue of courage was an emerging one at the time of this workshop, but one that has to be a foundation to race talk. Here I challenged us based on these questions: How comfortable am I with discomfort? Am I willing to do the personal work (examining implicit biases, privileges, and so on) that it takes to enhance the professional? How can we strive to maintain the courage some of these conversations will take, beyond our knowledge of the content?

I closed by asking participants to openly and voluntarily earmark which "S" they found to be their strength, quietly reflect on an "S" that could be strengthened, and commit to one action they would take to improve an area they felt needed strengthening. Interestingly, no one cited sacrifice, sanctuary, or separation as strengths (though not everyone shared).

As our conversation ensued, I found it useful to set apart the elements of the framework that docents might put into practice outside of their workspace, namely solid relationships, sanctuary, and sacrifice.

Participant Responses and Lessons Learned

Opportunities for Disclosure

Participants shared that they felt challenged and uncomfortable at times, but that they also felt respected and enjoyed building personal or professional examples suitable to the framework. Respect led to a freedom of expression in the space and open disclosure, even after formalities had ended. For example, one teary-eyed participant said that she felt immediately defensive when I began to compare evidence from the media and from scholarly literature that highlighted how instances of marginalization remain commonplace. She almost "shut down," but kept listening in large part because I positioned myself as someone learning alongside her (part of my introduction included Michelangelo's quote "I am still learning" to emphasize my role as learner in the process of facilitation). I generally remind my audience that "I am not the expert," nor do I know everything, and that my positionality as a woman of colour and migrant may uniquely influence what and how I facilitate race talk, including mistakes made, or how the audience "hears" me. This same participant concluded that shedding, self-awareness, and separation were areas to work on, and said that she has to make conscious efforts to remember that difficult moments go beyond the personal (it's not always about her)—that the issues surrounding race are so much bigger. She was surprised to find that reflecting on the "S" elements helped bring perspective to the assumptions that evoked defensiveness and regulated some of her challenging emotional tensions.

Adult Education Connections

Though I used andragogy as a foundation for discussion, I wove in other concepts and approaches commonly linked to scholarship on adult learning in the United States. For example, the importance of critical self-reflection (e.g., Brookfield, 2009), understanding how informal learning can occur, situated learning via communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and constructivism (facilitating adult learners' meaning making as for collaborative knowledge building) were evidenced as we compared and contrasted the elements. Arguably, too, using andragogy alongside my 8S framework allowed me to expand andragogy's assumptions to be more critical for my workshop context. Introducing andragogy as a foundation allowed the audience to make a better connection to varied facilitation strategies embedded in my race-talk framework—thus helping them understand the *why*. Finally, I found myself learning to practice what I preached in embodying my own framework's elements. For instance, as I gazed across the audience at times, I had to be consciously self-aware, gauge my speech, and engage separation (not always knowing what participant silences or straight-faced expressions meant—not assuming).

Lingering Questions

Like many workshops with somewhat complex content, much is covered but much is also left unanswered for both participant and facilitator. Participants kept saying that I "got them thinking." Subsequently, they wished to explore many questions after the session concerning issues such as identity and privilege, micro-aggressions, and building sustainable cross-cultural relationships and solutions, beyond the personal, that would drive change.

Those evoked and confirmed questions of my own: How might the workshop have been different if participants understood foundational issues like these and others? What if I had co-facilitated with a museum educator, or if the group had been ethnically diverse? Might applying the framework be even more enhanced? One docent had an interesting conflict concerning the work of an African American artist: As a White person, could she actually say the name/official title of the art project even though it might be offensive to African Americans? When I asked how peers of colour had handled that exhibit, she confessed that, although she is supervised by one of them, she had not asked them for fear of offending. I challenged her concerning *solid relationships* and *sacrifice* (courage). I learned later that her question and the workshop in general began to increase cross-cultural dialogue. For example, an educator of colour shared that she had been approached by docents for the first time to discuss artworks they had difficulty teaching from. She felt this initiation of a dialogue with her was directly because they felt empowered from my visit to open up and be honest about their struggles using certain racial terms. Further, she explained that the workshop and resulting conversations equipped docents with specific tools and strategies to create better learning environments for visitors.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

"Facilitating Difficult Race Based Art Projects: Considerations for Adults" was a workshop aimed at sensitizing museum educators to tools for building emotive capacity toward managing difficult dialogues on race that they may encounter on tour. Workshop responses to the 8S framework proved consistent with discussions in the scholarly literature about race talk and adult learning spaces: that learning to facilitate takes time and practice, that racial identity does matter in the process, and that understanding self and repositioning emotions as tools for learning are paramount (e.g., Brookfield, 2018).

Attempts at training on race talk or other elements of difference should be designed as a consistent process over time, should involve those who are most willing (to build capacity), and should involve a variety of intentional initiatives. These could include a mix of individual reflection and small-group dialogue, and move beyond that to experiential learning (for example, having docents engage in cross-racial experiences and field initiatives outside the museum). It also seems important to engage in the struggle of adjusting the "expert" lens in some cases during race talk to avoid assuming. This is a work in progress for most of us who have been trained to be specialists of any kind. Finally, it is important to highlight potential advantages and disadvantages of race talk in a museum space—and my suggestion to use the 8S framework. One advantage is that many adult groups that visit City Museum (and others in general) do so with a desire to engage with some of the "hard" racial issues inherent in a given exhibit and to gain a greater understanding of it. Museum educators have a unique opportunity to dig deep for authenticity in the discourse. On the other hand, unlike those of us in formal classroom courses, museum educators do not have the luxury of extended weeks of time with adult learners to establish significant trust and safe space as critical foundations to race talk. As such, goal setting is important, as is creatively strategizing for valuable informal and incidental learning opportunities. We all learned that it takes courage and intentionality to engage in race talk authentically. Regardless of the tools we have, without these two traits, we run the greater risk of missing out on unique ways museums can foster critical pedagogy and inclusion. A central part of

building emotive capacity for the discourse is building from the inside out. For as Harper and Hendrick (2017) reminded us, "Visitors deserve our care and if we are open to sharing and eliciting points of view about an object beyond its formal qualities, a surprising and rich experience may happen" (p. 164).

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