Practicing Change, Changing Practice: Gallery Educators' Professional Learning in Times of Reckoning and Upheaval

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Abstract

Art museums are increasingly responding to calls for exhibitions, community engagement, and institutional changes that confront and unsettle taken-for-granted knowledge, structures, and ways of working. Grounded in such a dynamic and evolving field, this qualitative study asked the following: What does gallery educators' own learning look like -- and what motivates it? How does ongoing competency building inform critical dialogue with visitors and support wider efforts to reshape the field through an ethos of social justice? Drawing on tenets of critical pragmatism, transformative adult learning, and constructivist grounded theory, my thesis comprised three manuscripts based on findings from two series of interviews with gallery educators in Canada and Scotland. This article highlights my findings, contextualizing my analyses on the shifting ground shaping gallery education in both countries. In doing so, it contributes to both a relative paucity of scholarly research on critical professional learning in art museums and an emerging body of literature addressing the impact of the

coronavirus pandemic on the working lives of gallery educators and the futures that lie ahead.

Introduction

Art museums are increasingly responding to calls for exhibitions, community engagement, and institutional change that confront and unsettle taken-for-granted knowledge, structures, and ways of working. Recently, growing calls for decolonization and reconciliation (Decolonisation Guidance Working Group, 2020; Danyluk, S. et al. 2022), international debates about the definition of museums (Brown, 2019; Seymour, 2022), closures forced by pandemic lockdowns (Kendall Adams, 2020; UNESCO, 2020), and worldwide protests for racial justice (Anderson et al, 2020; Francis, n.d.; Museums Galleries Scotland, 2020) have all upended and shifted systems, practices, and perspectives in these institutions. Situated in these evolving, often fraught contexts, my doctoral research drew on tenets of transformative adult learning, critical pragmatism, and constructivist grounded theories to examine gallery educators'[1] experiences and perceptions as critical adult learners themselves.

As a practitioner-scholar, I posed the following research questions to examine professional learning in my field of practice: What does gallery educators' professional learning[2] look like and what motivates it? How does it shape or respond to change? Through this line of inquiry, I sought to better understand how myriad paths to competency building can support or hinder critical gallery dialogue, an ethos of social engagement, and wider efforts to

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[1] Depending on the location, institution, or research project, 'gallery educators' may also be referred to as art museum educators, gallery or museum teachers, mediators, learning assistants, learning curators, engagement officers, animators, gallery assistants, guides, or docents, among other titles. I use the term gallery educator to refer to individuals facilitating front-line learning and engagement work with the public in art museums, galleries, and other visual art exhibition venues. Unless otherwise specified, this includes both paid educators and docents (or volunteer guides, as they are more commonly referred to in Canada).

[2] I have chosen to opt for the term professional learning to encompass the range of learning educators undertake while at work to nourish their practice. I understand professional learning to comprise a wide scope of both individual and collective learning activities related to volunteer and paid work that are situated in time, place, positionality, relationship, discourse, and power.

foster justice and equity in art museums and galleries. Based on interviews conducted in 2018 and 2020, this dissertation built upon a growing body of literature that situates museum educators as adult learners (Deprizio, 2016; Palamara, 2017; Tran, Gupta, and Bader, 2019) as well as scholarly and practitioner research on training among museum educators that is grounded in critical theory (Anderson & Keenlyside, 2021; Dewhurst and Hendrick, 2018; El-Amin and Cohen, 2018; Murray-Johnson, 2019; Ng, Ware, & Greenberg, 2017). A response to a historical disconnect between critical adult education and museums (Clover et al, 2016), my research bridges the two with a reflexive approach to examining professional learning in its many forms.

In what follows, I first provide an overview of my study before positioning myself as a researcher-practitioner and contextualizing my project in its historical moments and geographical locations. I then briefly outline my theoretical framework, method, and procedure, summarize key findings, and conclude with final reflections.

Overview of the Study

I opted for a manuscript-based thesis comprising three articles because this format was most aligned with my practice-focused research. I explored questions that reflect conversations and challenges currently happening among those working in art museums, and I hoped that the manuscript format would 1) allow for quicker circulation, 2) potentially inform research and activities that have already begun —however expertly or inexpertly — in many institutions, and 3) offer researched-based support for initiatives currently in the development stage. A manuscript-based thesis also kept me closer to the field; as I researched and wrote my dissertation, I continually shared my research and teaching at professional conferences and peer learning events so that my work could inform—and be informed by—both academics and practitioners in the field of art museum education.

My first manuscript was based on a 2018 pilot study comprising in-person interviews with new docents at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art (Keenlyside, 2019), where I had begun training recruits in 2015. This pedagogical inquiry with my past students as participants was an important professional learning endeavor for my growth as a trainer; it also solidified my interest in continuing reflexive conversations with other gallery educators about the learning they do to support critical practice. For my subsequent manuscripts, I examined

professional learning among paid gallery educators[3] in Scotland, where I conducted my second round of data gathering via online, open-ended interviews and focus groups in 2020 (Keenlyside, 2021, 2022). I linked the three manuscripts with a portrait of participants' professional learning and bridging texts that situated my findings in their wider contexts. These self-reflexive texts, which addressed decolonial turns and whiteness in art museums, drew on additional literature and my own professional learning trajectory over the duration of my doctoral studies. Further reflections focused on transformation as a theoretical starting point, learning through the writing process, and implications for future research.

Background and Contexts

Interviews with all participants happened during distinct historical moments – one that drew public attention to colonial histories and settler-Indigenous relations, the other that drew attention to intersecting pandemics (Santos et al, 2021). I interviewed docents on the heels of the anniversary of Canadian confederation (2017), not long after the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) in which the Canadian Museums Association and the museum sector are named in its calls to action. I interviewed all eight paid educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, and five interviews and both focus groups took place after the police murder of George Floyd (2020) and subsequent protests for racial justice.[4]

All stages of this project were intimately tied to my ongoing attempts to maintain a critical teaching and research practice that has the potential to positively impact organizational change, institutional priorities, and everyday

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[3] As per their request, to protect participants' anonymity, their institutions remain unnamed throughout this dissertation.

[4] While the police murder of George Floyd in the US prompted protests in multiple Scottish locations, activism in the country dates back earlier and is ongoing. Most recently, in May 2022 a public inquiry began into the 2015 death of Sheku Bayoh who passed away after being restrained by police officers (Brooks, 2022).

working relationships. I began my data collection locally in Canada and completed it in Scotland, where social justice has infused museum and gallery discourse for decades (Allen, 2008; Scottish Museums Council, 2000) and the field is supported by an active professional association (Engage, 2022). The orientations of this research site thus aligned exceptionally well with my own practice-based research concerns and outreach to my peers.

Both Canada and Scotland are experiencing growing activism from within art museums. In tandem with recently published recommendations for decolonizing museum narratives, representations, and organizational structures (Asante, 2022; Danyluk & MacKenzie, 2022) and the creation of intentionally critical educational, curatorial, and leadership positions (Glasgow Life, 2020 Huntarian, n.d.; National Gallery of Canada, 2022; Ng & AyAyQwaYakSheelth, 2018), both the Canadian and Scottish museum sectors are confronting whiteness and white supremacy in their institutions (Greenwood, 2021; O'Neil, 2020; Perla, 2020; Williams, 2021). Here I locate myself as a settler, white, abled, cis-gendered woman of Scottish, Irish, and English descent. I acknowledge the over-representation of this positionality in my field, and as such aim to do two things in my work as a practitioner-scholar: 1) acknowledge the ongoing contributions and struggles of BIPOC scholars and practitioners and 2) locate my project along a career path spent exploring the possibilities and limits for social change in museums and galleries whilst negotiating how I am complicit in the systems that I believe we must collectively transform.

Literature Shaping the Study

Critical education theory (Brookfield, 2012, 2018; Johnson-Bailey, 2012; Pitt and Briztman, 2003) and critical museology (Lindauer, 2006, Lonetree, 2012; Vogel, 1991) offered a starting point to reflect with docents about their ongoing training and learning needs particularly as it related to difficult histories and other challenging subject matter. Subsequent data gathering with paid educators about their professional learning leading up to and in the wake of COVID-19 and protests for racial justice was also informed by two adult education scholars: Patricia Cranton (1996), whose early work in Canada explored the relationship between professional development and transformative learning, and Jenny Reeves who, in Scotland, has theorized professional learning as a relational practice. As neither author has examined the learning lives of museum educators, I drew on the critical museum education scholarship of David Ebitz

(2008) and Eileen Hooper Greenhill (1999) to draw parallels and connections. More recent practitioner-scholarship positioning museum educators as adult learners (DePrizio, 2016; McCray, 2016) and highlighting anti-racist museum educator training (El-Amin & Cohen, 2018; Ng et al, 2017; Dewhurst & Hendrick, 2018; Murray-Johnson, 2019) also informed me as I worked with my participants and the data they shared with me.

Theoretical Framework

I proposed two complementary and equally reflexive theories as a framework to develop my interview guides and analyze participants' narratives: Transformative Learning (TL) (Cranton, 2016; Holdo, 2022; Johnson Bailey, 2012; Mezirow, 1991, 1997; Stuckey et al. 2014) and Critical Pragmatism (CP) (Forester, 2014, Kaldec, 2008). Contemporary transformative learning theory makes explicit links between personal and social change and is complemented by critical pragmatism's emphasis on critical listening and dialogue. Both offer a space to consider 1) change as both process and outcome and 2) how power and positionality shape perceptions, meanings, and experiences. Combined, they offered key ideas or sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2014) that shaped my initial coding phase: examples are shifting/opening perspectives, taking action/acting differently, imagination, confluence, and possibility.

Adult education scholar Juanita Johnson-Bailey (2012) underscored questions of race and racism and the importance of educator self-reflexivity about power and positionality in the process of transformative learning (2012). Combined with CP's attention to power structures and their instabilities (Forester, 2014, Kaldec, 2008), this speaks to calls for white gallery educators to consider how privilege and racism shape their teaching strategies and growing efforts to challenge white privilege and supremacy from within (Mayer, 2014; Dewhurst and Hendrick, 2018, Ng. et al. 2017).

Lastly, this framework also provided an explicitly critical lens that did not overstate the emancipatory intent of my studies, as I wanted to avoid diluting the radical critical pedagogical theory that has informed my work as an educator (Giroux and McClaren, 1994; hooks, 2003). Put another way, as active insiders, my own and my research participants' actions, observations, and interpretations were shaped by our direct involvement in establishment museums and the privileges that accompany said involvement, particularly as white people. Applying this mode of reflexivity to both gallery teaching and research, I posit

that professional learning in this spirit is future thinking and accountable–critically attuned to the individual and institutional boundaries of our work and historicized within the shifting specificities of the current moment and those to come.

Method and Procedure

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Over the course of my doctoral research, I turned to Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) in part for its emphasis on 'methodological self-consciousness', which implicates the researcher in ongoing self-reflexivity. For Charmaz (2014), this requires researchers to 1) detect and dissect worldviews, language, and meanings, 2) challenge their assumptions about how their research advances social justice, and 3) pay close attention to relationships of power, identity, subjectivity, and marginality. CGT rejects the possibility of neutral researchers, which speaks to longstanding critiques of neutrality claims in museums. With its iterative approach to coding, analytic memo taking, and concurrent data collection and analysis, CGT also appealed to me in its attention to detail and transparency. Here, I highlight key tenets that bridge theories of transformative learning, critical pragmatism, and CGT: awareness of self and others, questioning assumptions and structures, polyvocality, flux, possibility, and attention to context, relationships, and power.

Procedure

In early 2018 I put out an open call via email to my past trainees who had since become docents and approximately 1/3 of those contacted responded positively to my recruitment efforts. Participants were all white and semi-retired or retired. Participants determined the location of the interviews, which ranged in length from 50 to 75 minutes. Between June and October 2020, I conducted my second round of data collection – open-ended interviews and focus groups -- with paid gallery educators in Scotland. The first group comprised three employees in a city art museum whom I had met through a local networking event. The second included five freelancers who also self-selected, responding to a call I had posted online through two national cultural organizations and subsequent word of mouth. I facilitated all 11 meetings via videoconferencing (four on Microsoft Teams, seven on Zoom); interviews ranged in duration from 40 to 60 minutes, focus groups were between one and two hours, and the

follow-up meeting lasted one hour. While I didn't specify any criteria other than a professional practice, all participants were white[5] and early to mid-career.

I conducted nine one-on-one interviews in French and the remaining nine in English, as I did both focus groups and the follow-up meeting. I audio-recorded and transcribed them all with the aid of online software. I coded all transcripts working line-by-line and using gerunds. I completed one round of initial coding and an additional two rounds of focused coding for each article. As follow-up gestures, I sent a summary and recommendations to docents and their supervisor, sent the permanent workers a short report that highlighted points for possible action, and met with three of the five freelancers for a follow-up meeting during which we reviewed my findings and the research process more broadly.

Discussion

Highlights from Two Sets of Data

Findings from my interviews with docents revealed tensions related to visitor-centered approaches, negotiating discomfort, and the recognition of difficult histories in non-contemporary artworks. Key overlapping issues included uncertainty, reluctance, and positionality and pointed to a need for establishment museums to remain critical and foster anti-oppressive approaches when training, implementing, and evaluating dialogic gallery teaching. Contrary to popular criticisms of volunteers as prone to top-down teaching, participants all expressed their commitment to facilitating gallery dialogue that is attuned to active participation and multiple meanings. With specific regard to difficult histories, their responses suggested that the institutional support they required went beyond lectures and workshops to include clear boundaries, resources, and shared opportunities for critical reflection and experiential learning. As one participant succinctly noted, "training doesn't solve everything in life".

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[5] This speaks to an overrepresentation of whiteness among docents in North America (Haigney, 2020) and paid educators in the Scottish museum sector. According to the latest (2011) census data, 96% of the population in Scotland identified as white, and this number drops in the country's largest cities (Scotland's Census, 2021). According to a recent report from a decade later only 3% of museum staff in Scotland are Black people and People of Color (Intercultural Youth Scotland & Lima, 2022).

I gathered data in Scotland during the first wave of the pandemic, which included being in lockdown, thus I spoke with participants at a moment of tension vacillating between urgency and slow reflection. As gallery educators were working from home, furloughed,[6] or put out of work indefinitely, participants' responses highlighted the precarity of the field, which motivated me to consider the relationship between employment status, professional learning, and the unique barriers and possibilities it presented.[7] Overlapping contexts of the coronavirus pandemic and protests for racial justice shed light on tensions between the precarity and privileges experienced by white freelance gallery educators, and also offered all participants an opportunity to rethink and act on their professional priorities, pedagogical strategies, and the future of their practice.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, paid educators stressed the everyday learning that happens in their jobs, particularly through their interactions with participants and colleagues, adapting in the moment, and ongoing, informal self-assessment. They also spoke in-depth on their dual role of educator/learner, and their discussions of what critical professional learning meant to them pointed to the synergy between critical teaching and learning. In addition to my focus on COVID-19 as a catalyst for both discussing and mobilizing informal learning, I also identified key, overlapping issues including the tensions inherent in learning from visitors and colleagues, cyclical institutional priorities, and the power dynamics of siloed and hierarchical museum cultures. Having examined the politics and the possibilities of everyday, informal professional learning, I stand by its potential to inform wide-reaching institutional and professional policy related to internal and external collaborations, decision-making, human resources, program planning, and future professional development.

Paid Educators and Docents: Distinct and Common Ground

Examined together, both data sets revealed what participants were learning up to and during the time of data gathering, the activities they engaged in, and the

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[6] This refers to a UK-wide government scheme that paid employees on temporary layoff a percentage of their usual salary.

[7] This also motivated me to pay freelancers for their time. I did so according to the Scottish Artists Union pay scale, as recommended by a colleague in Scotland who regularly hired freelancer artists and gallery educators.

ethos that drove their learning. All participants' learning comprised a variety of activities along a formal/informal continuum that revealed a dual role of educator/learner. Among all participants, most learning occurred independently or in small groups. Learning closer to the informal end of the continuum was common and varied, and there was much overlap between participant groups. This included self-directed research through books and online resources, visiting exhibitions, and learning while teaching. As one paid, permanent educator noted, "I actually look on every day as a learning experience. [….] there are always things to learn—even if it's from a negative experience, there is something to learn from that." Similarly, a docent stated, "Training, sure — but at the same time, it's only once you've had an experience that you're really confronted with something … You can tell us about it, but it's not the same as living it with the visitors, you know?"

The need to learn about newly acquired artworks, unfamiliar collections and/or temporary exhibitions was also expressed by participants in both groups. This included, but was not limited to, curatorial messages, artists' biographies, and formal/art historical underpinnings of the selected artworks. One educator noted that they were still learning about what the collection meant to the public. This was echoed by docents and other paid educators alike, who emphasized learning about new artists that might be of interest to a particular group of visitors, learning what is potentially contentious, contextualizing both artworks and exhibitions, learning about the learning space itself, addressing the politics of representation, and grappling with discourses around value, rarity, and 'special'.

Participants in both groups also discussed the importance of personal connections between visitors, collections, and exhibitions; this included diverse representations, anecdotes about the artist or artwork, and personal meaning-making. Examples of professional learning related to visitor needs included hidden disabilities and audio descriptions, and less tangible examples such as visitors' attitudes, inhibitions, and worldviews. Paid educators all pointed to the need to stay on top of contemporary pedagogical frameworks and rapid curriculum changes, whereas docents more often referred to the skills they brought to gallery teaching from previous careers. Docents spoke less frequently about updating their approaches; these differences point to two important distinctions between participant groups: docents' later life stage and their recent completion of a 12-week training program focused on dialogic art museum

education (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011; Dysthe, 2013; Hubard, 2015; Lachapelle, 2016).

COVID-19 closures marked an immediate shift to digital engagement for paid educators.[8] As I outline elsewhere (Keenlyside, 2021) freelancers' learning during this time included an increase in online professional development and upskilling to equip themselves to offer sessions during the pandemic (e.g., teaching on Zoom, COVID-19 restrictions for working in-person, and new logistical concerns). For permanent educators, required learning also included software for creating digital resources, new social media platforms, and online engagement with school and community groups.

Critical Ethos

Paid educators emphasized their appreciation for their colleagues' competencies, mutual support, and peer teaching, visitors' contributions to educators' personal and professional learning, as well as the need to resist complacency and the status quo. For them, critical learning meant identifying and upsetting their assumptions and biases, accepting discomfort and uncertainty, championing their learning, and listening more actively. For docents, this meant addressing the political and historical contexts for artworks' production and reception and moving out of their comfort zones to learn about artworks they perceived as challenging or didn't like, appreciate, or understand. Reflections among paid educators on race and racism echoed a sense of collective settler responsibility that drove multiple docents' learning priorities.

One difference I remarked on between participant groups was the importance paid educators placed on embedding their critical professional learning through institutional change. While docents made important links between their learning and their organization, it was less about their role in helping to shape the institution's future. Rather, their concerns were centered on the need for the institution to be clear in its messaging and intentions so that as volunteers they could act accordingly in the galleries. Docents and permanent educators more frequently discussed their accountability to their institution than freelancers, all of whom were out of work at the time of interviews. While docents' responses also included elements of institutional critique, paid

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[8] Some docents also made the move to online engagement, but this happened after our interviews. As such, I did not include their experience of this, or any other learning associated with the pandemic in my dissertation.

educators were more attentive to injustice in their institutions and the field more broadly.

Docents spoke frequently about safety and comfort among visitors and their own openness to new ideas, possibilities, challenges, and difficulties. Not unlike comments made by some paid educators, this openness related to adaptability, curiosity, embracing challenging artworks, being informed on local linguistic and cultural divides, and being ready to learn through difficulty. Docents expressed a need for diversity in their training content and the artworks, artists, and mediums they engage with, and to anticipate diverse reactions and cultural references among visitors. That said, few named their whiteness and how it shapes gallery dialogue with visitors. Paid educators, on the other hand, demonstrated more reflexivity regarding the subjectivity of their own positionalities, their futures, and the urgency of contemporary shifts in the museum education profession. While participants in both groups demonstrated concerns regarding society-wide, collective reckonings and responsibilities, all paid educators stated their need to build anti-racist competencies.

Research Participation as Professional Learning

The three permanent educators used the research transcripts as a tool for collectively reflecting on their practice moving forward. Discussions offered freelancers a similar yet distinct learning space; because these educators did not work together regularly as a team, they didn't mobilize their responses into direct action. That said, they recognized the focus group as an important space for dialogue with peers and thinking through their practices. This research project was but one part of a larger period of reflection during which participants were re-evaluating their practices, the conditions under which they would work in the future, and the kinds of working relationships and organizational values they prioritized. Examining the group learning experience in more depth brought me full circle to one important limitation of this study, which was the lack of a focus group among docents. This would have not only had the potential to gather additional data; it could have also created a space that these participants expressed a desire for–a low-risk, non-judgmental forum to ask questions, test out ideas, make mistakes, and receive feedback.

Concluding Reflections Going Forward

Volunteer or paid, emerging or experienced, gallery educators take up learning as an ongoing part of almost every aspect of work. Examining the fertile yet

largely under-researched overlaps between critical museum pedagogies and professional learning, my doctoral dissertation investigated gallery educators' experiences and perceptions as critical adult learners themselves. I considered what their learning looks like, what motivates it, and how it shapes or responds to change. Based on data gathered at important moments of museum activity and activism and in response to colonial legacies, systemic racism, and the COVID-19 pandemic, it contributes to a fertile yet largely underexamined field of inquiry, responding to both a paucity of scholarly research on critical professional learning in art museums and an emerging body of literature addressing the impacts of a global pandemic on museum workers.

Through this project, I sought to better understand how myriad paths to competency building can support or hinder critical gallery dialogue, an ethos of social engagement, and wider efforts to foster social justice in art museums. As such, this article has outlined how the complexities of specific moments in time and space shape the conditions of research participants' engagement in research projects, the content of their responses, and the wider contexts in which they work. Via conversations with both volunteer and paid educators–all of whom were white–I regularly returned to the questions author and education scholar Dion (2004) invited non-Indigenous educators to ask themselves when engaging with stories of First Nations: "What did I not know before? Why didn't I know? What is the significance of not knowing?" (p. 71).

In fleshing out the significance of these questions in my first manuscript through to the submission of my dissertation, I propose what I refer to as *conscientious curiosity*, a reflexive and non-extractive professional curiosity informed by critical adult and museum education (Keenlyside, 2022). Here I acknowledge my respect and appreciation for the scholarship of art education scholar Natasha S. Reid (2014) which, grounded in critical race theory, focused on the narratives of art museum educators of color. Not all educators are faced with the same professional and learning interests, needs, and challenges, which points to the specificity of my own experience, and those of my research participants, as white gallery educators and adult learners. I also recognize that professional learning does not exist outside of the exclusionary systems that educators work in, and that social justice aims cannot be realized without more diverse representation in the field, financial and institutional support, and anti-oppressive structural change.

Like many scholars, my research was upturned at a significant moment when public engagement in art museums moved online or was paused

altogether. These institutions were facing renewed calls to address systemic racism and other issues of equity and representation while simultaneously putting large numbers of educators out of work indefinitely. Volunteer programs were halted, revamped, or shut down entirely. As argued by activists, practitioners, and scholars alike, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing problems facing art museums–problems that have been both challenged and perpetuated by the work of volunteer and paid educators entrusted with engaging visitors in learning experiences.

Critically engaged professional learning opportunities increased significantly at this moment, pointing to the timeliness, if not urgency, of my overarching question of how and why gallery educators learn to work differently, and the potential for their learning to foster personal and organizational growth. This context shaped the content and directions of my manuscripts in unforeseen ways, and the bridging texts that weave them together underscore my own reflections and reckonings at this moment and those leading up to it. At the same time, this context also reinforced the analytical framework I had developed early on in my doctoral research and forced me to reimagine the conditions under which research with gallery educators was to continue. Namely, how my work as a white practitioner-scholar needed to be firmly grounded in a spirit of critical peer support, recognition, and reciprocity.

At the end of my follow-up discussion with freelancers, one participant asked me about the unexpected 'twists and turns' that I had faced as a student researcher during the pandemic. My response acknowledged the challenges, fears, and disappointments, but also stressed that it ultimately came down to adapting, which is what I do as a gallery educator. It is what many gallery educators have always done. Depending on institutions, locations, and positionalities, this has been harder for some. As such, others will have to continue more intentionally—and more radically — as we work towards transformation in ourselves, our institutions, and our field.

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