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CHAPTER 18

“Defying Gravity”: Toward Collaborative, Transformative Models for University Gallery and Museum Exhibition Creation

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*Too long I've been afraid of
Losing love I guess I've lost
Well, if that's love
It comes at much too high a cost!*
—“Defying Gravity,” *Wicked*¹

THE theater production of *Wicked* is a behind-the-scenes account of how the witches in *The Wizard of Oz*² became known as good and evil. The tale is surprising because it interrogates the assumptions most audiences made when they first read or watched *The Wizard of Oz*.

In *Wicked*, we learn that Elphaba, the green “Wicked” Witch of the West, is an intelligent, independent woman. Elphaba is misread and misunderstood by those around her because of her unusual appearance and intellectual gifts. When Elphaba tries to reveal that the Wizard is not an ethical leader but an oppressor, he frames her as the Wicked Witch of the West.

Elphaba thinks she has a friend in Galinda. Galinda (who renames herself Glinda to please a man) is a superficial social climber who seizes the opportunity to align herself with the Wizard by accepting the title, “Glinda, the Good Witch of the North.” In the end, *Wicked* reveals how Elphaba is framed and the struggles of two women trying to make the best choices they can in a land led by a dictator.

In her efforts to break through the dictatorial systems of Oz, Elphaba envisions that her choices actually are unlimited. Instead of second guessing or going along with the accepted practices of

subjugation, she chooses to trust her instincts and, in her words, defy gravity. Through her ethical leadership style, she demonstrates that we can be unlimited—together.

In the same way *Wicked* interrogates the systems of Oz, we can also interrogate the existing systems and practices of art museums, university departments of art, and their galleries. Here, existing rules and systems also favor a single narrative or vision rather than multiple narratives. These existing systems are problematic because they treat audiences and learners as unthinking, empty vessels instead of as contributing problem solvers (Freire, 1970).

For me, Elphaba’s struggles mirror some of the philosophical struggles that art museums and university galleries face today. Elphaba challenges conventional wisdom and she aspires to open up the traditions and citizens of Oz to new ways of thinking and being.

As both a visiting instructor in the department of art as well as the former Director of University Galleries at Texas A& M University–Corpus Christi and Curator of Education at the Art Museum of South Texas, I had a unique opportunity. While an instructor of a Museum and Gallery Practices course, I discussed with my students the traditional theories and “rules” of creating and presenting art exhibitions. While serving as the Director of the University Galleries and Curator of Education, I oversaw the presentation, selection, installation, implementation and evaluation of exhibitions and related programs. I also navigated within the challenges of the traditional university system and began investigating strategies to defy gravity.

While planning my first semester of teaching the Museum and Galleries Practices course, I realized that I could combine aspects of these roles to create a new curriculum that included related local professionals, institutions, and faculty. In doing so, students would work together and with others to create educational presentations that included multiple perspectives and narratives in order to encourage audiences to cultivate meaningful and skillful experiences and knowledge from the exhibitions and, perhaps most important, from one another. Like Elphaba, I hoped that my actions and the students’ collaborative exhibitions would open up new ways for museums and galleries to operate.

In this chapter, I first describe the systems and practices that are predominant in museums and university galleries today. Next, I share how I re-envisioned teaching the Museum and Gallery Practices course and the challenges that I encountered as I moved forward with implementing the changes to the course. Then I describe the two connected exhibitions created by the students in the course and how we used new museum and ethical leadership theories and practices to design and implement the exhibitions. Finally, I conclude by reflecting and responding to insight into how I envision university exhibitions and how the people who create them can defy gravity.

SOMEONE ELSE’S RULES

*I'm through with playing by the rules
Of someone else's game*

—Elphaba, “Defying Gravity,” *Wicked* (2003)

Similar to how Elphaba’s perspective was ignored and rendered unimportant by the Wizard, traditional approaches of imparting information from one authoritative perspective—whether it is in a class or via an art exhibition—overtly ignores other points of views. Also similar to how *Wicked* offers Elphaba opportunities to voice and reveal injustices, in the last 20 years many cultural workers

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have chosen to speak out against the traditional, authoritative systems and practices associated with art education and art history as they are taught in both art museums and university environments (Bal & Bryson, 1991; Corrin, 1994; Freire, 1970; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; King & Marstine, 2006; Marstine, 2006; Roberts, 1997). They argue that for learners and audiences from diverse communities, backgrounds, experiences, histories, and cultures to create meaningful relationships to the content being presented, it is essential that a variety of perspectives be shared.

However, in spite of the critiques, the art history canon, often referred to as the art historical context, remains the dominant curriculum utilized by educators and leaders in the arts, including art historians, gallery workers, museum directors, and curators (Mayer, 1998; Wallach, 1998).

Many of the critiques of the art history canon reveal the limitations of authoritative presentations. These limitations include the reliance on a singular, often limited, perspective, a lack of contextual information, and a lack of critical examination (Arth, 1994; Karp & Levine, 1991; Reese, 2001).

Stephen Weil (1995) argues that museums can and should challenge their own authority.

The art museum should not fear to be seen for what it is: a sometimes turbulent workplace in which the not-always-unanimous judgments of its staff members are as time-bound, as culturally determined, and indeed, as potentially fallible as the judgments of visitors. What is proposed is not the abdication of the museum's authority but rather the clarification—the making transparent—of the basis on which authority might be asserted. When a museum directs a visitor's attention to a particular work of art, is it unreasonable for the visitor to know who it is that thinks the work worthy of his or her attention, and why? (p. 109)

These comments suggest that scholars might better serve their audiences if they assumed the role of one of many participants in the construction, presentation, and critique of meaning (Roberts, 1997; Wallach, 1998).

Ivan Karp and Stephen Levine (1991) bolster the argument for scholars seeing themselves as participants rather than authorities. They assert that the creators of an exhibition are always part of the context of the exhibition.

Every museum exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it. Decisions are made to emphasize one element and downplay others, to assert some truths and to ignore others. The assumptions underpinning these decisions vary according to culture and over time, place, and type of museum or exhibit. (p. 1)

Here, Karp and Lavine note that the contextual information included in (and excluded from) an exhibition depends on the particular story that the creators of the exhibition wish to share and where and when they present the exhibition. As creators, they can never remove themselves entirely from what they create. "Knowledge is inextricably wedded to the social circumstances in which it is produced, [and] we must ask who or what determines the forms of interpretation to be included in intellectual debate and who or what determines the ones that are to be excluded" (Moxey, 1994, p. 15).

Finally, when content is presented without critical examination it perpetuates pedagogical models that privilege a single, authoritative voice. In his essay "Interpreting Gender Perspectives" (1994), Malcolm Arth states that, in museums, the intellectual process itself needs careful consideration.

The notion that there are several perspectives or alternative views is intrinsic to an intellectual approach. Libraries, universities, or any place in which scholarship occurs would be unimaginable without that principal. Only in museums do we find an arrogance that permits the one-sided view that the audience interprets "as truth" rather than as one person's view, one institution's view, one sexist view, or one racist view. (p. 98)

Arth and others ask museum scholars to consider that traditional museum practices not only present authoritative and, thus, limited perspectives but also end up discouraging critique and reflective conversations among learners. Pedagogical models that discourage critique and conversation risk silencing individuals rather than empowering them to fully experience the content of an exhibition.

A NEW COURSE

I'm through accepting limits

'cause someone says they're so

Some things I cannot change

But 'til I try, I'll never know!

—Elphaba, "Defying Gravity," *Wicked* (2003)

Can an educational experience at a museum or gallery include multiple perspectives? How might presenting multiple perspectives affect the educational process and a learner's acquisition of knowledge? How would such a vigorous presentation be created?

Just as Elphaba experiences limitations from the hegemonic wizard, new museum theory also rejects the singular narrative and instead has at its foundation the idea that multiple voices and narratives are necessarily part of the content of an exhibition. The creators of an exhibition contribute their voices and narratives, the audiences who attend an exhibition contribute their narratives, and the conversations that arise between and among these participants are themselves new narratives to add to the mix.

In Janet Marstine's book, *New Museum Theory and Practice* (2006), she calls for a new museology wherein the practices of museum workers and the systems and narratives presented by the institutions are reflective of one another.

Theorists call for the transformation of the museum from a site of worship and awe to one of discourse and critical reflection that is committed to examining unsettling histories with sensitivity to all parties; they look to a museum that is transparent in its decision-making and willing to share power. New museum theory is about decolonizing, giving those represented control of their own cultural heritage. It's about real cross-cultural exchange. New museum theory is not, however, monolithic; it embraces many viewpoints. (p. 5)

In their essay, "The University Museum and Gallery: A Site for Institutional Critique and a Focus of the Curriculum," Lyndel King and Janet Marstine (2006) point specifically to university museums and galleries as sites for disrupting traditional, authoritative educational systems. University museums and galleries "can become places for critical inquiry perhaps more comfortably than other kinds of museums, because they operate in an academic climate where the questioning of authority is encouraged" (p. 268).

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As an instructor of museum and gallery practices as well as the director of the University Galleries, I was familiar both with new museum theory and with how the theory was and was not being applied in the creation of exhibits at the University Galleries. As Director of the Galleries, I wanted to see the Galleries transformed into a site of critical examination and multiple narratives. I thought it made sense to start this kind of transformation with the students I was teaching because they had not yet become accustomed to the traditional systems and practices. I began to evaluate options for facilitating a semester-long course in which participants could both learn and understand the traditional challenges facing museums and galleries and work together to create new exhibitions that referenced their own backgrounds and narratives.

I was committed to the idea of the students in the course creating their own group exhibitions because I wanted them to be empowered as agents of change and experience defying gravity rather than traditional, oppressive tactics. According to Helen Klebesadel (2006), examining systems of power as an agent of change or through a lens of agency invites us to interpret, acknowledge, and reflect in personal and critical ways.

Agency, the ability to act or exert power, requires an awareness of the dynamics of power operating within the spheres that affect your life. You can bring 3 levels of reflection to an analysis of your situation. You can interpret the meaning of your own personal experiences as brought to your work. You can also acknowledge the institutional contexts you find yourself working within and decipher the social, political, economic, and cultural agendas that guide those institutions. This awareness aids your ability to exert control over a given context when you are conscious of your intentions. Finally, you can reflect upon the larger global context for your art and your actions. (pp. 249-250)

As I planned the course, I applied Klebesadel's framework to my own planning processes. First, I evaluated the personal experiences that I brought to both of my jobs. I wanted it to be clear to the students in the course that my desire to incorporate and apply new museum theory to the course was a result of my own educational experiences. I felt that in my own education, I had learned the philosophical underpinnings of museum and gallery processes, but I had not had a chance to apply the philosophies. Another set of personal experiences that I brought to the course planning process was my discussions with students who had previously participated in the Museum and Gallery Practices courses that I taught. Many of these students shared their desires for more opportunities to apply what they had learned in class readings and discussions.

Next I considered the institutional contexts my students and I had to work within. The factor most relevant to me was the unique opportunity to explore the existing partnership between the university and the local art museum. These institutions are different for many reasons especially because the museum is a collecting institution and the galleries are not. The two entities had an existing financial partnership in that state funds were sent from the university to pay salaries for the museum's professional staff. Beyond this financial relationship, very little trace of a partnership between the two entities was visible to the public or even to many of the employees at the two institutions. In addition to providing students with real-life experiences, I also sought to re-establish a visible partnership between the museum and the university. I hoped that doing so would create openings for future collaborations between the museum and the university's Department of Art.

Knowing that I wanted the students in the course and the museum to work together, I reflected on my personal and professional experiences with these two groups. The students and the museum had compatible needs. The students needed to understand the roles of museums in the creation and implementation of exhibits, and the museum needed both workers in the museum and exhibitions for the university galleries.

There were also challenges in initiating this relationship. Both the students and I had only limited access to the museum staff and its collections, and we had only a 16-week semester to design, create, and implement the projects. Nevertheless, I was hopeful that by both engaging new museum theory and consciously examining the existing systems of power, I would be creating a course that would enable the students, museum, and university galleries to collaborate, transform, and move toward defying gravity.

"A CHANCE TO FLY"

As someone told me lately:

"Ev'ryone deserves the chance to fly!"

—Elphaba, "Defying Gravity," *Wicked* (2003)

I chose to base the structure of the new Museum and Gallery Practices on Marlene Fine's leadership strategies as outlined in her work "Women, Collaboration, and Social Change: An Ethics-Based Model of Leadership" (2007). Her leadership strategies are practical ways of thinking about transformation, communication, and collaboration. Like Elphaba, I believe everyone deserves the opportunity to soar and explore new experiences, knowledge and understanding.

According to Fine (2007), and comparable to Elphaba's character in the musical *Wicked*, transformation means that we give everyone the chance to expand and make positive changes and contributions. Leadership and success are about more than self-interest or corporate interests: "You've got to make a difference where you're at—whether it's your local community or your global community" (Fine, 2007, p. 182).

For the fall semester's course, my planning began with the knowledge that neither of the university galleries had exhibitions scheduled for the winter semester. I set into motion before the semester began that the students would be divided into two teams and that the teams would work with both the museum staff and with me to create exhibitions for each university gallery featuring art from the museum's collection. Using Fine's model, I wanted to help establish a community in which students, curators, and faculty came together to create and collaborate on new models of leadership. In this manner I hoped to begin transforming the traditional authoritative perspective often relied upon by museums and galleries into the perspectives of a multi-voiced team.

Fine's second leadership strategy is communication. She believes that a leader creates a safe and honest environment through communication (Fine, 2007). From the beginning, I acknowledged that I would have preferred to meet with the students and allow them to make more of the preliminary decisions. However, a 16-week semester is a rather short timeline when trying to coordinate so many institutions, spaces, and people, and I wanted to ensure that spaces were available for the students' exhibitions at the end of the semester.

In my initial communications with the museum staff, I discussed with them the many reasons why their help on these projects would be beneficial to the museum. Works from their collection

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would be viewed by new audiences, and the students, potential future colleagues of the museum staff, would be receiving invaluable practical experience. There was some initial hesitation about agreeing to lend works of art without knowing how the works would be interpreted. However, through discussions and open communication, we were able to come to an agreement about which works of art the class could borrow.

Because the students were not able to attend these initial meetings with the museum staff, they had to rely on my descriptions of the meetings. I was dissatisfied that the information the students were receiving was coming from a single perspective and thus shared with them my discomfort with being the only perspective to which they had access. I hoped that future students of the course would have more access to museum staff from the beginning.

Fine's third leadership strategy is collaboration. "Ethical leaders use collaborative, democratic, and inclusive means and strategies; build consensus among constituents; and communicate openly and honestly" (Fine, 2007, p. 185). In conjunction with assigned readings and discussions about content, context, and audience, the students met both as a whole class and also privately in their teams. Since the university does not have an art collection like a traditional museum, I invited the two student groups to start with ideas rather than with the collections (King & Marstine, 2006). I told them that the exhibition opening dates coincided with the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday weekend, and each group independently chose to base its exhibition on the idea of a dream. They created exhibitions entitled *Everyday I Dream* and *Assassination of Dreams*.

The collaborative component of this project was highly visible. Once class readings and assignments were complete and after meetings with the museum's staff—including public relations, educators, curator, and preparator—each group assumed the roles of a museum staff. The students selected the works of art for each exhibition and conditioned, wrapped, transported, loaded, unloaded, placed, and installed the works. They also worked together to design, develop, and in some cases, implement invitations, press releases, educational programs, didactic materials, and labels.

The collaborative aspect of this project was, in some ways, the most challenging. At the same time, it was also the most transformative. The museum staff members were challenged by the collaborative aspect because it meant that they were relinquishing some control. The collaboration was also challenging for some of the students. The students were encouraged to step into new leadership roles while working within the rules and regulations for their exhibitions as established by the museum and university. However, as a result of working through these challenges, all the participants were transformed. They learned new strategies for how to work together, they forged new relationships with their peers and colleagues, and they created new pathways for communication. For me, there was great joy in watching all of us (myself definitely included) change as a result of this collaboration.

TOGETHER WE ARE UNLIMITED

Together we're unlimited

Together we'll be the greatest team

There's ever been.

—Elphaba and Glinda, "Defying Gravity," *Wicked* (2003)

After years of conflict, Elphaba and Glinda start to see that by working together, even or especially from their personal perspectives and experiences, they are stronger and can accomplish more. Similarly, the teams of students came to embrace individual abilities and how to build the team based on these strengths.

Everyday I Dream was intended to appeal to younger visitors and families. The exhibition was planned for and installed in the satellite gallery located off-campus in a shopping center and near a neighborhood. The visual narratives in this exhibition were more light-hearted. The students chose landscapes and portraits of children in the hopes of inspiring the visitors to the exhibition, especially the children, to think about and begin to articulate their dreams. The pieces were installed at a lower height than is traditional to reinforce the appeal to families and children.

Visitors to the exhibition were invited to write a wish or a dream on a piece of paper and to place their dreams on a branch that was part of the exhibition. As they left the exhibition, visitors were given a small wooden dove to represent the dream they wrote down and to remind them of the importance of working for peace.

Assassination of Dreams was sited for the on-campus gallery. The works in this exhibition had more adult, confrontational themes than the works in *Everyday I Dream*. Students selected works from the collection that, to them, represented dreams being shattered. The walls in the on-campus gallery are two-stories tall, and works in the gallery can be viewed from the lower level and from the catwalk surrounding the upper level. Typically, exhibitions in this gallery are installed on the lower half of the walls, and visitors can look down at the art from the catwalk. The students collaborating on the exhibition chose to install art both on the lower level and the upper level so that visitors would have to move around both levels of the gallery to see all of the pieces in the exhibition. Here they also hoped to physically model the need to explore and excavate our dreams from various perspectives.

As part of the exhibition, the students installed a feedback wall. Visitors were invited to write their dreams and commentary on the exhibition on sticky notes. The students chose sticky notes because they are an informal medium, and the students thought that visitors would be comfortable writing their authentic reactions and thoughts on sticky notes.

When the project was over, most participants agreed that the experience had been worth it. The students felt that they had connected with visitors to their exhibitions and that the visitors had been able to interact with the art and react to the art in ways that did not privilege a singular, authoritative narrative. The exhibitions and the processes for creating the exhibitions had planted seeds toward social change for all of the participants in the projects.

The processes of brainstorming, discussing, planning, placing, installing, inviting, opening, evaluating and striking the exhibition using a leadership model based on the tenets of transformation, communication, and collaboration became part of the curriculum for the Museum and Gallery Practices course. This course is now an elective rather than a required course, yet because students know that the course is a unique opportunity for hands-on experience in translating theory into practice, students continue to fill the class.

Thus, the purpose of ethical leadership is social change, to make a positive contribution in the world. People take on leadership roles because they have a duty and responsibility to do good for others, both inside the organization and in the larger external environment. (Fine, 2007, p. 185)

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The work that was accomplished through *Everyday I Dream* and *Assassination of Dreams* demonstrates the potential for developing and implementing programs using theories and practices associated with new museum theory and ethical leadership. Through these projects we sought not only to offer alternative models for creating exhibitions, but also—and perhaps more importantly—to offer alternative models for working with groups of people from various institutions that often have diverse ideas and perspectives. Through the creation of this course and throughout the semester, we learned that exhibitions and related programs can be designed and implemented in ways that promote positive transformation, communication, and collaboration. The leadership opportunities empowered the students to see themselves as active participants in meaning making, which, in turn, led them to understand the importance of employing multiple voices and perspectives no matter what path they choose.

THERE'S NO FIGHT WE CANNOT WIN

There's no fight we cannot win

Just you and I

Defying gravity

With you and I

Defying gravity

—Elphaba and Glinda, “Defying Gravity,” *Wicked* (2003)

In the story *The Wizard of Oz*, the tale nears its conclusion with Dorothy throwing water on “The Wicked Witch of the West,” melting her into nothingness. In the musical *Wicked*, the narrative reveals Elphaba emerging from a trapdoor, very much alive rather than disintegrating. In *Wicked*, instead of Elphaba and Glinda being at odds, they choose to work together, with Glinda the Good sending the oppressive Wizard away and proclaiming her plans to transform the rules. Having demonstrated her passions as a community and animal-rights activist, Elphaba departs Oz with her beloved. Analogous to how Elphaba and Glinda learned to put aside their differences and honor their unique perspectives toward a more democratic alliance, interpersonal connections and potential relationships can be explored as an integral element of exhibition experiences when they are developed and implemented as narratives based on multiple perspectives heard through open communication and collaboration.

Just as Elphaba was dissatisfied with the status quo, ethical approaches that promote agency can be applied in order to disrupt and suspend traditional methodologies. Elphaba also encourages Galinda (her real name) to evolve into an agent of change. Instead of just blindly listening to a misguided dictator, Galinda learns to reflect and respond to situations from her own foundation.

Similarly, by offering a combination of new museum theory with an ethical leadership strategy, exhibitions in university galleries—and, no doubt, in other locations—can be sites where students, faculty, community members, visitors, and museum professionals come together as co-creators to win the fight over traditional exhibition development strategies that bring down these potential partners. Constructing exhibitions that strive to use equitable orchestrations similar to *Everyday I Dream* and *Assassination of Dreams*—including honest, open forms of communication and collaborative leadership strategies—enables co-creators to defy gravity and expand through unknown

thresholds. Analogous to Elphaba’s journeys, we were able to fracture many of the problematic traditions associated with presenting one hegemonic voice and omitting opportunities for viewer participation. In doing so, we not only ruptured prior practices, but also ignited a team of collaborators striving to defy gravity.

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Author Notes

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Since the completion of this paper, the author resigned from her positions at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and founded Yogiños: Yoga for Youth where she is developing a program implementing mindfulness and movement in the museum. FMI: yoginos.com or contact the author (elizabeth@yoginos.com).

Endnotes

¹ The lyrics included throughout this chapter are attributed to Stephen Schwartz (2003).

² In this chapter, mentions of the film or book *The Wizard of Oz* refer to the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, Director) and the 1900 children’s novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum.