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Professionalization of guides in museums of art and history

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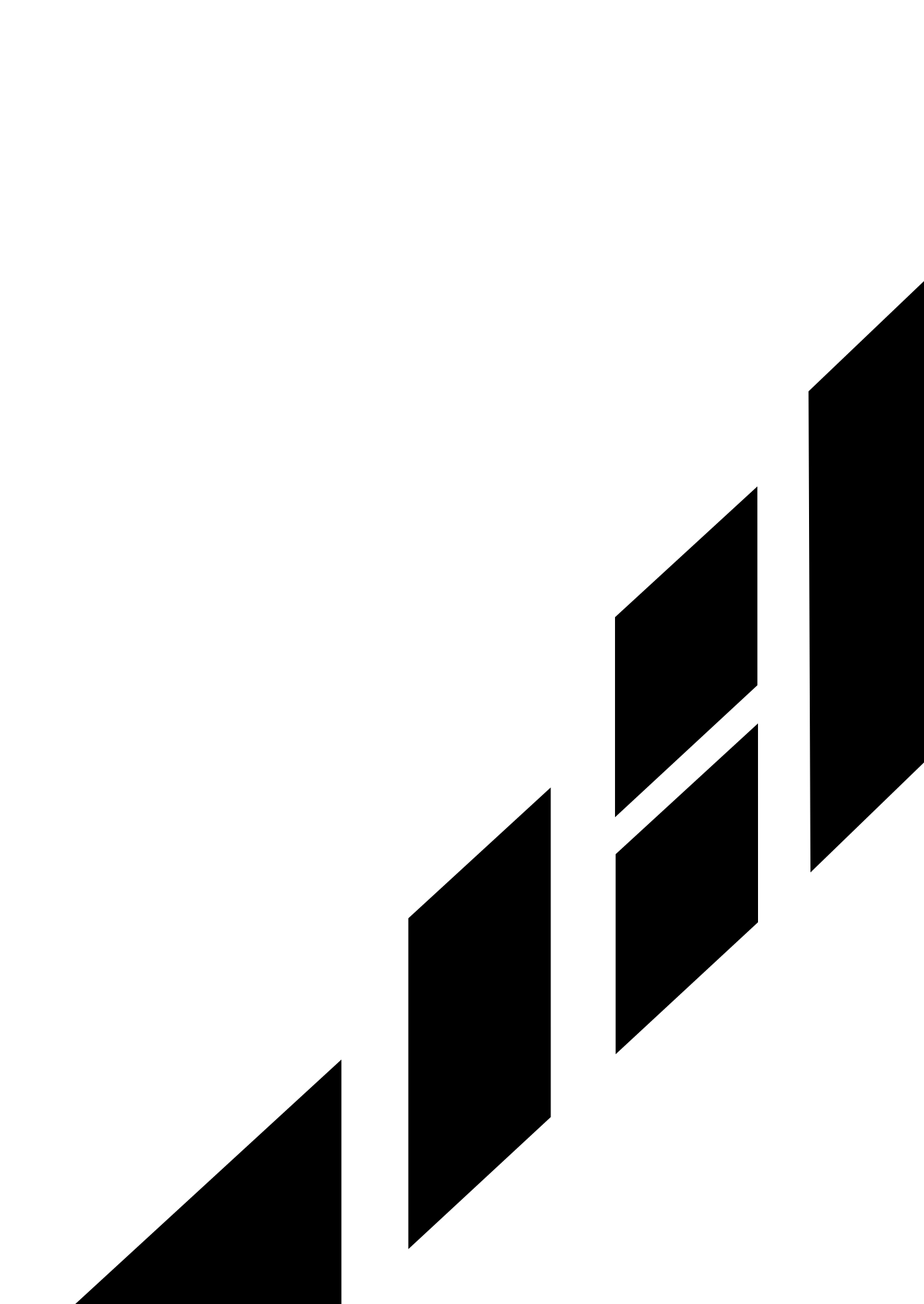
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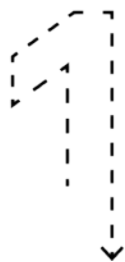
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CHAPTER



Introduction

After two hours in a bus, a group of 34 children accompanied by four escorts arrive five minutes after the scheduled starting time of their tour and enter the museum. Three enthusiastic museum guides welcome the children, show them the lockers for their coats, and immediately divide the class into three groups. The guides remain calm—even though the next school group will arrive in 55 minutes—and help the children to adjust to the museum environment by asking them about their bus ride and whether this is their first visit to the museum. The guides briefly explain the 50-minute program to the children and outline the learning goals. Next, the guides ask the children what they think is expected of them, which allows the guides to address the museum's dos and don'ts. After a mere 5 minutes, the children are ready to engage in a guided museum tour.

The complexity of this situation demands a lot from the guides (e.g., flexibility, people skills, openness, organizational skills, time management, and many more competencies), but this only covers the start of the tour. The “real” museum visit is vastly more involved.

The guiding profession has a long history. Royalty displayed their wealth to visitors in the 17th century. In the 19th century, museum directors began guiding experts through museum collections. Currently, freelancers and volunteers guide a wide array of tourist and school groups through museums. Over the centuries, museum guides have been confronted with different views on how to educate an audience, the dynamic role of museums in society, and the changing requirements of fulfilling their tasks.

In this dissertation, we examine the role of the guided tour in both art and history museums in the context of learning environments. We focus on learning outcomes that can be achieved during guided tours and the specific competencies museum guides need in order to facilitate visitors' learning. As such, this dissertation contributes to the knowledge about learning and teaching in museums and further the professionalization of museum guiding. The focus of our research was motivated by recent developments in museum practices.

Over the past 30 years, a shift has occurred in museums from an object-centered approach to story-centered exhibitions, where museums focus more on enhancing the visitors' experience—sometimes at the expense of the objects (Hein, 2014). Currently, terms such as accessibility, equity, and visitor-centered are prominent in the literature on museums (McRaney & Russick, 2010). As Weil noted, there is a change

in museums from “being *about* something to being *for* somebody” (Weil, 2002, p. 1). Doering and Pekarik (1996) introduced the concept of “entrance narrative”, which acknowledges that each visitor brings his or her own personal and social context to the museum. Related to this is the adoption of a more dynamic approach to culture and heritage (Frijhoff, 2007; Smith, 2006). This approach emphasizes that museum guides should avoid ascribing an essentialist story to the meaning of an artwork or a historical object. Instead, guides should work from the idea that there is a continuous and social process to meaning-giving and to multiperspectivity (Van Boxtel, Grever, & Klein, 2016).

These shifts also influence ideas about how education should take form in museums. All the above-described developments show that there is a growing responsiveness to the ideas and needs of the visitor; one clear-cut story is no longer sufficient. Several educational theories applied to the museum context underscore this point. For example, Dewey (1938) described learning as a social and interactive process, and Kolb argued that concrete experience is one of the constituting components of learning (Hoogstraat & Vels Heijn, 2006). Similarly, in (social)constructivism and dialogic teaching, learning is considered an active and social process, where interactions with the environment generate new knowledge and connect to existing knowledge, memories, and experiences (Alexander, 2008; Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Falk & Storksdieck, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Roberts, 1997). Furthermore, these ideas about learning mirror recent theories on “embodied cognition” (Efland, 2004; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). This vision on learning emphasizes that knowledge is embedded in psychical action, emotions, and perceptions. The concept of learning seen as active and dialogical stands in contrast to a “classic” tour in which visitors mainly listen to the guide who explains a series of museum objects. As a consequence, museums offer plenty of opportunities to acquire knowledge through psychical and sensory experiences. Increasingly, museums offer programs that combine a guided tour with a workshop. For example, children first look at works of art and thereafter create their own drawing or object. On the whole, museum guides emphasize learning through experience in their tours (Baily, 2006).

These changes and developments require museum educators and museum guides to continuously reflect on the competencies that are needed in order to deliver good, entertaining,

and effective guided tours and on how professionalization of museum guides could take form. During a longer period of time, two of the largest museums in the Netherlands—the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (2003–2013) and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2005–2013)—partly closed their doors for renovations. Subsequently, most of the museum guides were dismissed, and new guides were recruited in the run-up to the reopenings. For both museums, the dismissal allowed museum administrators to reflect at length on the question: “What determines the quality of a museum guide?” The two museums, along with the Van Gogh Museum, collaborated with the department of Child Development and Education at the University of Amsterdam to discuss what competencies museum guides need. During these meetings, museum professionals and education researchers exchanged their expertise, but the different parties also noted the lack of research literature on the competencies and professionalization of museum guides—a fact acknowledged by museum education researchers (Best, 2012; Grenier & Sheckley, 2008). This insight resulted in a jointly initiated research project, *Rondleiden is een vak* [Guiding as a profession], and was funded by Fonds 21 and the Mondriaan Fonds.¹

Context and scope

The aim of the research project on which this dissertation reports was to fill the above-described research gap by providing art museums, history museums, and guides a clear picture of the competencies that are needed to facilitate a museum visit as well as methods to further develop these competencies. In this dissertation, we focus on learning and teaching during guided tours of art and history museums in particular.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as:

A non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.¹

The engagement with this heritage of humanity and its environment for the purpose of education is the exact focus of

this study. Within the larger category of museums, we focus on art museums and history museums in particular for several reasons. Compared to the current research on learning and teaching in science museums, limited research focuses on art museums and history museums (e.g., Andre, Durksen, Volman, 2016). Furthermore, art museums and history museums are the most visited museums by school groups in the Netherlands (Stichting Museana, 2014). As noted above, our partners in this research project included the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, which contains an art and historical collection pertaining to Dutch history from the middle ages to the present; the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, which focuses on contemporary art and design; and the Van Gogh Museum, which is dedicated to the life and works of Vincent van Gogh.

Museums offer a variety of educational activities, of which the guided tour is the most prevalent.² Guided tours can focus on many different groups, such as family groups, tourists, and adults. In this study, we limit ourselves to school groups for several reasons. First, and most important, children's learning in the classroom environment has been studied extensively, but less research exists that focuses on learning and teaching in museums. Although, the museum environment potentially suits active, embodied, social, experiential, and dialogic learning as propagated by many learning theorists (e.g., Alexander, 2008; Dewey, 1938; Efland, 2004). Second, school groups make up one third of all museum visitors in the Netherlands (Stichting Museana, 2014), so captivating children's interest is important for museums in order to ensure future visits. Last, our research institute is dedicated to learning and teaching in schools; therefore, our expertise centers on this particular group.

Museum guides are often volunteers (Merritt, 2006). However, the three participating museums pay professionals to give tours; therefore, we consider giving tours a profession, which can be defined as "a coherent set of tasks with associated competencies that is more or less standardized and on which there is a social consensus" (Albertijn & Hoef-

1. See <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/>

2. Sixty percent of school children who visit the Rijksmuseum engage in a guided tour program.

nagels, 2012, p. 5). Nerland and Karseth (2015) argued that “standards have always been critical for professional work performance, as they form the basis for collective actions and shared conventions of good practice” (p. 5), further explaining that standards should not limit the space of action for the professionals in their daily practice. A standardized framework of competencies for museum guides was not available at the start of this project. A continual process of professionalization is recommended for any line of work; this holds true for the museum guide profession. Although we focused on guides who make a living from giving tours, the results of this study may also be germane to volunteers because the competency profile details what is needed to give an appropriate tour to visiting school groups.

Below, we discuss the museum as a learning environment, examine related works on museum tour guiding, and present research on the professionalization of museum guides. This brief introduction precedes the presentation of the research questions, the research design, and an outline of the dissertation.

Learning in the museum

Museums offer a large amount of educational activities, including lectures, artistic performances, workshops, film series, and many more (Neill, 2010). In our study, we focused on guided school field trip tours of art and history museums. A distinction of the guiding profession is the context in which the teaching takes place. This context (the museum) differs from classroom teaching in a number of ways. In the classroom environment, children mostly learn about art and history via books, lectures, assignments, and videos. Museums, however, offer students the opportunity to see authentic objects that relate to a historical period, person, or story. Furthermore, museums show the objects in their original shape, colors, and in rooms surrounded by other works of art. These objects are one of the main reasons why school groups visit museums (Wright-Maley et al., 2013) and offer many chances for learning. In short, museums can be an additional support to the art and history lessons that take place within classrooms.

Unfortunately, (empirical) research on what children learn or experience during guided tours of art and history museums is scarce, but several books about teaching and learning in the context of a museum have been written. For instance, Hein wrote *Learning in the Museum* (1998), in which

he detailed a brief history of museums and discussed extensively how educational theories relate to museum learning. Hooper-Greenhill wrote several books, including *Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance* (2007), which focuses on museums as teaching and learning environments and the measurement of the outcomes and impact of museum visits. Burnham and Kai-Kee described new approaches to gallery teaching, examined processes of intense looking, and thoughtfully facilitated dialogue in *Teaching Art in the Museum* (2011). Falk and Dierking advised museum professionals on factors that influence the museum visitors' experience in *The Museum Experience Revisited* (2013)—a revised version of the influential book, *The Museum Experience* (1992). Last, in *Teaching History With Museums*, Marcus, Stoddard, and Woodward (2012) described case studies on teaching in historical museums, sites, and houses.

Falk and Dierking (1992) argued “learning in the museum is a complex interactive experience, incorporating diverse contexts, as well as a profoundly durable kind of learning” (p. 125). For museum administrators, the essential goal is to capture visitors' attention, hold it for as long as possible, and in doing so, provoke a new or deeper understanding of some aspect of science, history, art, the natural world, or human behavior (Hughes, Jackson, Kidd, & Bresler, 2007). In a study by Castle (2001), museum guides indicated that their aims are twofold: fun and educational. What exactly can be learned or experienced depends on the type of museum (Falk & Dierking, 2000; 2013), which implies that museum educators and museum guides should take the specific characteristics of their museum into account when they develop programs or give tours. Falk and Dierking (1992) called for a better understanding of how and what visitors learn in order to improve the quality of museum visits.

Thus, it is important to get a clear picture of the characteristics of art and history museums as learning environments and to determine which learning outcomes may be achieved during a guided tour program.

Competencies of museum guides

A common problem in museums is that visitors do not slow down (Serrell, 1997). For example, when school children rush through a museum with a worksheet, they fail to carefully and consciously look at and examine works of art or objects,

which diminishes their learning experience. Falk and Dierking (1992) explained that personal interaction is crucial in the museum experience; a guide who succeeds in making the visit personal for each visitor increases the likelihood that the experience is memorable—further explaining why children often remember guides years after their visit. Therefore, key to the visiting groups' learning experience are the professionals who facilitate the educational activities and help visitors to slow down. These professionals go by many names: mediators, tour guides, facilitators, educators, narrators, docents, and so forth,³ but in this dissertation, we call them museum guides.⁴ In order to provide a meaningful and joyful learning experience for children, guides need a specialized set of skills, content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge.

The fact that there is ambiguity about their job title is an indicator that there is no clear-cut view of the profession. By contrast, people who educate children in schools are called teachers and their practices are studied intensively. Many competence profiles exist, and formal training programs at universities prepare teachers for their profession. Museums increasingly must account for the quality of their educational activities; therefore, the theoretical underpinnings and instruments to evaluate the quality of their tours and museum guides are also necessary. However, no certified training program or widely supported profile of competencies for museum guides exists in the Netherlands. Furthermore, besides more general works on teaching and learning in museums (as mentioned above), studies on the competencies that museum guides need and how they can facilitate learning are scarce (Best, 2012; Grenier & Sheckley, 2008; Neill, 2010). Because guides also contribute to students' learning experiences, a clear analysis of these competences is urgently needed.

One of the earliest studies that specifically focused on tour guiding in a museum was a doctoral dissertation by Bleick (1979), who developed a competency profile for volunteers who give tours to school children in art museums. The com-

3. In Dutch: *rondleider*, *museumdocent*, *gids*, *educator*. When we use the term *docents*, we speak of volunteers.

4. In this study, museum educators are the people who write the tour programs and supervise the museum guides.

petencies were divided into four main categories: (a) communication skills, (b) knowledge, (c) affective attributes, and (d) touring methods and strategies. Furthermore, Bleick noted that most of the important touring competencies were not incorporated in training programs for the guides.⁵

Almost three decades later, Tran and King (2007) created a knowledge framework for museum educators [guides] in science museums and learning centers, which consists of six components: (a) context, (b) choice and motivation, (c) objects, (d) content, (e) theories of learning, and (f) talk. The authors organized these components into three domains of knowledge: (a) museum content knowledge, (b) museum pedagogical knowledge, and (c) museum contextual knowledge. Tran and King posited that all components interact with each other.

Taylor and Neill (2008) noted that an important first step for the guide is to form an immediate rapport with the visitor, helping them to feel welcome, and to tailor the tour to their interest, wishes, and knowledge. In her doctoral dissertation, Neill (2010) explored art museum guides'⁶ perceptions of their role and how these perceptions shape their practice. Neill (2010) used Pond's (1993) description of the qualities that a (travel) tour guide needs to shed light on the role of museum guides. She observed similarities in both professions, such as content knowledge, enthusiasm, group management skills, flexibility, commitment to their institution, and motivation for life-long learning. Neill found that for guides who give tours to adults it was essential to personalize the tour for each group and to show dedication to their task and to the museum. In this, Neill observed that guides might fill different roles: being an intermediary between object and visitor, assuming a supportive role, or being a mediator. In order to engage visitors, guides use techniques such as levity and humor, storytelling, interaction, and theatrics.

In Belgium, Albertijn and Hoefnagels (2012) developed a competency profile for educators in the field of cultural education, ranging from dance instructors to museum guides. The main categories of their profile include (a) culture specific competencies, (b) pedagogical competencies and methods,

5. Bleick used the term *docents*.

6. Neill studied the practices of *docents*, or volunteers.

(c) team and networking, and (d) self-evaluation and development. For each category and competency they named the basic activities, what the educator should know and should be capable of doing, and which attitudes are needed.

To date, although there are studies that focus on volunteers in art museums, science educators, and educators in a broader sense, none of these studies specifically focus on the competencies that professional museum guides need when they give tours for school children in art and history museums. Especially lacking is a clear description of the pedagogical competencies that are needed to foster children's learning experiences in art and history museums. Many museum guides (at least in our study) give tours in both art and history museums, which also raises the question whether museum guides need distinctive competencies for each type of museum.

Professionalization of museum guides

Just like the lack of research on the competencies of museum guides, there is not much research on their professionalization. Most studies on museum guides are dedicated to the training volunteers receive, which varies from self-study in a library to lectures and coaching trajectories with experienced guides (e.g., Neill, 2010). For example, Fernández-Keys (2010) studied art museum guides' information needs at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the way in which museum librarians can support these needs. There are studies that specifically focus on how museum guides develop professionalization. Castle (2001) indicated that the best way to foster guides' learning is by activities such as shadowing other guides—rather than learning by reading a training manual. In her dissertation, Best (2012) called for training programs that are more audience-focused, and concluded (by using detailed studies of guides-in-practice) that tours are a highly interactive pursuit, which has implications for the work and management of guides. Grenier (2009) examined in what ways volunteer museum guides develop expertise. Her findings were divided in two categories of learning: (a) formal training and continuing education, such as trainings programs, lectures, and observations, and (b) informal and incidental learning, for example, learning from others, learning by doing, self-directed learning (books, films), or designing tours. Tran (2008) also highlighted this last point and argued “making museum educators [guides] simply deliverers of someone else's programs will hinder any

sense of belonging to a profession, and devalues the capabilities of many who work in such roles” (p. 148).

Unlike the limited research on museum guides, more research is done on the professionalization of school teachers. In a review study, Van Veen, Zwart, Meirink, and Verloop (2010) named several examples of how teachers engage in professional development. In line with Van Veen et al., professional development of guides in this dissertation refers to the process and activities that are explicitly designed to foster or improve the guides’ knowledge, attitudes, and practices in order to improve student learning (Guskey, 2003). Typical activities associated with professionalization are workshops, lectures, conferences, and seminars. Van Veen et al. noted that these are examples of more traditional forms of professionalization, in which teachers have a passive, consuming role, and the activities and content are not targeted to address the problems and questions of a teacher’s individual context. Van Veen et al. (2010) explained that the focus should be on domain-specific pedagogy and active learning, such as collaborative projects, coaching and peer evaluation, mentoring, and research done by teachers. Although empirical evidence is not conclusive, a current assumption is that professional development is more effective when the teacher actively constructs knowledge, when learning occurs in collaboration with colleagues, the content matches and is embedded in the daily work environment, and when the limitations and possibilities of the workplace are taken into account (Van Veen et al., 2010).

Therefore, in order to foster the professionalization of the guides, it is important to give them an active role (i.e., co-ownership in their personal development) in which interaction, self-reflection, a shared inquiry, and collaboration are essential.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to shed more light on guided tours as a learning context, on the competencies of museums guides, and on ways to foster professional development, this thesis consists of four studies and one overarching question:

How can we define competencies of museum guides in art and history museums, and how can professionalization be fostered?

In order to answer this question, four sub questions are addressed in this dissertation:

1. Which learning outcomes are considered suitable to work towards during a guided tour of art museums and history museums with a school group?
2. Which competencies do museum guides need in order to give tours to primary and secondary school students in art museums and history museums?
3. How can a self-evaluation by the guide support post-observation conversations between the museum guide and the museum educator?
4. How and to what extent does a professional learning community (PLC) consisting of student teachers and museum and teaching professionals foster professional development?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND STUDY OUTLINE

The above described research questions resulted in four separate studies. The first focuses on the museum as a learning environment and the potential learning outcomes of a guided tour; the second on the competencies of museum guides; and the third and fourth on the professional development of guides. As noted by Neill (2010), most studies about tour guiding neglect to include the voice of the guide. Furthermore, Nerland and Karseth (2015) argued that it is crucial that professionals develop procedural standards (p. 17). Therefore, because guides perform the job, our primary data-collection method consisted of interviews with guides. For all four studies, the educators and museum guides of the partnering museums were available for observations, interviews, and conversations.

Chapter 2 contains a discussion of museums as learning environments. Knowledge about the characteristics of museums as learning environments is crucial in order to understand what the role of the guide could and should be. Based on a literature study, an expert panel meeting, and an expert questionnaire, we developed two lists of learning outcomes attainable when guiding school groups through art museums and history museums. The learning outcomes are organized into five main categories.

Chapter 3 outlines the study that examined which competencies museum guides should possess. In order to answer

the second research question, we looked into the literature on teaching in museums and interviewed museum guides and the heads of education of the partnering museums in order to develop a preliminary list of competencies. This list of competencies was validated through a Delphi study, in which 26 museum education experts across the Netherlands participated. In two rounds, consensus was found on 45 competencies, divided over four main categories.

We used the outcomes of Study 2 to develop a self-evaluation tool for museum guides and an observation tool for museum educators. For Study 3, reported in Chapter 4, we used interviews to explore how museum guides and museum educators evaluate the use of these instruments during post-observation conversations. Furthermore, we looked into the question of how museum guides participate in these conversations when their self-evaluation is used as the starting point. In order to answer this question we analyzed seven post-observation conversations.

Chapter 5 reports on Study 4—a twofold case study in which two PLCs were organized: one focused on history and one on art. These PLCs consisted of three museum guides, three student teachers, a museum educator, and a teacher educator, who collaboratively developed pedagogical approaches for a guided tour program. The aim was to foster the professional development of all participants. We used prequestionnaires, learner reports, video observations, and interviews to gain insights into the two groups.

Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the main outcomes of the four studies. Furthermore, we discuss the limitations of these studies, implications for theory and museum practices, and we close with suggestions for further research.