Getting Started
Preparation for the Session Leader

Museums, science centers, and other informal education institutions offer powerful engagement and learning experiences for children and adults of all ages. Staff facilitators, such as museum educators or docents, play an important role in these settings and can enhance and deepen visitors' interactions at exhibits and during programs. By effectively balancing the exploration of educational content with sensitivity to the needs and desires of visitors, facilitators create personalized interactions with the potential to impact visitors long after the experience is over. Despite their important role, however, it's rare for staff to have the opportunity to watch other facilitators in action, learn about and practice new facilitation strategies, or discuss their practice with peers and colleagues. Even rarer are quality, sustained, research-based professional development resources to help these individuals reflect on their work and improve their practice.

The video-based professional development program presented in this guide is intended to help fill this gap and provide a catalyst for staff facilitators in museums, science centers, and other informal learning environments to discuss, reflect on, and improve their educational practices in conversation with their colleagues. The materials were developed as part of the REVEAL project, which studied the work of facilitators interacting with families at interactive exhibits in a science center (see Introductory Session Handout 1, "Provoking Reflection"). While other professional development (PD) projects have focused on more formal programs, such as stage demonstrations or classes for school groups, this professional development resource centers on informal, conversational interactions between staff and visitors. In addition to being a common way that staff members engage with visitors, we believe these types of unscripted interactions offer unique opportunities for educators to capitalize on the characteristics of informal learning and enrich visitor experiences while still allowing families to pursue their own goals and priorities.

The REVEAL professional development program is made up of a short introductory session and five discussion modules. Each discussion module involves viewing two videos of a facilitator interacting with a visiting family at a math exhibit, discussing these videos, and practicing new facilitation strategies and techniques based on the conversations. The professional development guide includes links to the videos for each module and handouts for participants, as well as instructions for the leader about how to organize the session and facilitate the discussions.

Timing and Scheduling

We understand that it can be difficult for floor staff to meet frequently or for an extended period of time, so each of the discussion sessions is between 1.5 and 2 hours long. Depending on the size and talkativeness of your group, you may require a bit more or less time. Since the homework assignments are designed to encourage experimentation and to give participants time to reflect, we suggest scheduling sessions at least a few days, but no more than two weeks, apart. If you wait longer than two weeks between sessions, it's easy for participants to lose sight of the content.

Tailoring the Program to Your Institution

Museums and science centers come in many flavors, and each has its own culture or shared philosophy that guides facilitated interactions with visitors. These factors will influence your participants' approach to the content of this program. Consider the following as you prepare to lead these sessions:

- Who are the primary audiences for your exhibits? How do you think these visitors view your museum?

- Does your team have a shared understanding of what "good" facilitation looks like? If so, how would they describe it?

- How do facilitators conceptualize the goals of their interactions with visitors?

- How and when do facilitators currently have the opportunity to work together? How do they support each other's work?

If you think it would be useful, you might want to have a discussion around these issues during the introductory session.

Choosing Practice Exhibits

The REVEAL project focused on facilitator-family interactions at math exhibits, and the videos in this program take place at two particular exhibits. These are unlikely to be exhibits you have at your own institution. It is useful, therefore, to have two to three specific exhibits that your participants can refer to when thinking about how the program content applies to your institution. The exhibits in the videos are open-ended, have multiple potential outcomes, present opportunities for exploring content at different levels of understanding, and accommodate intergenerational visitor groups, so it's best if you can choose similar exhibits from your own setting. You may want to enlist participants' assistance in choosing exhibits, especially if they work in different, unrelated areas. These exhibits will also be used for "reflection homework" between sessions, when participants will be encouraged to observe or interact with families and record their observations.

Watching Video Together

You and your colleagues may have not had the opportunity to collaboratively watch and discuss videos of facilitation before. We have included a set of tips for you to share with your group about best practices for viewing video in the context of professional development. Similarly, your group may not have had experience sharing personal stories and views about their work, so it's important to establish group norms at the outset to create a safe space for the conversations. Discussing both of these issues is part of the purpose of the introductory session.

Scheduling the Introductory Session

The purpose of the introductory session is to give participants some background information about the program, introduce the practice exhibits from your institution, discuss video viewing tips, and make sure the schedule and process going forward work for everyone. There are several handouts that participants get at this session that will provide more in-depth preparation for the first discussion module. Be sure to read them yourself before the introductory meeting.

Using Discussion Modules 1–5

After the introductory session, the professional development program is divided into five discussion modules, each written to help you as the session leader guide activities and conversations with your colleagues. Each of the modules includes seven standard sections. Below we outline the general structure and content of each of these.

Module Sections

Module overview
The overview highlights key information for the session leader, including module objectives, required materials, the general plan and structure for the session, and tips for the facilitator.

Warm-up activity
The group can try an optional physical or mental exercise, based on improvisational or icebreaker-style games. (See the section below about warm-up activities for more information.)

Homework discussion
At the outset of each module (other than Module 1), participants have the opportunity to discuss what they've done since the previous meeting, sharing new insights, perspectives, and observations.

Module introduction
The session leader introduces the module topic, highlights key ideas from the pre-module background reading, and helps participants connect the topic with their own previous knowledge and experiences.

Video discussion

This section includes background information about each of the module videos; questions, observations, and key moments relevant to each video; and a handout for participants to support the video-based discussions.

Reflection homework

The session leader introduces activities to try out after the session, as well as an introductory reading for the next module.

For further exploration

Each module ends with links to additional bonus videos and further readings relevant to the module topic. Full references for additional readings, as well as literature referenced in the handouts, are contained in the References list. A full list of video links is included in the Appendix.

Module Icons

Icons throughout the modules alert the session leader to the nature of each module section.

Materials

Agenda

Referencing a reading or handout

Physical activity or active facilitation practice

Information for the session leader to deliver or paraphrase for participants

Discussion among participants

Video viewing

Module Content

Warm-Up Activities

There are multiple reasons for the warm-up activities in each module, including giving participants a break from sitting, providing a kinesthetic way of experiencing the content, and, perhaps most importantly, getting to know and trust each other better. Some of the issues participants will be discussing can be sensitive and staff may feel hesitant about sharing their views unless the group has established a strong sense of trust. Particularly in institutions where participants don't often work closely together, warm-up activities can be an excellent way to build this trust and establish a supportive environment for the conversations.

We know that many institutions have a limited amount of time for professional development, so we have made the warm-up activities optional. Each module is paired with a companion activity from the NISE Network "improv exercises" guide (http://www.nisenet.org/catalog/improv-exercises) that we believe best fits the session focus. However, please feel free to incorporate any activity that you think fits the parameters outlined in the "Warm-Up Activity" section of each module.

These warm-up activities are largely based on improvisational (improv) games. The thesis of improv is: "say yes!" In other words, be open to whatever possibility is presented. As such, these activities do have a level of interpersonal risk associated with them that can be uncomfortable for some people. As a leader, it is important for you to encourage a supportive environment in which anything someone says or does to contribute to the game is welcome.

Group Discussions

During the module discussions, your job as leader is to keep the conversations focused, encourage contributions from all participants, and manage the overall flow and timing of the module. In this role, don't be afraid to gently end a conversation in order to move on to the next topic or section. Similarly, don't be afraid to dive deeper into a topic that particularly resonates with your group. Ultimately, the goal of this program is to support professional reflection and learning, so use your time with your group as best you can with this in mind.

The discussion questions during the introduction and the video sections of each model are arranged in a specific order to help guide the flow of the conversations and support participant learning and reflection. We encourage you to take the time to go through the questions in the recommended order. At the same time, you may need to modify the discussion protocols to accommodate the size of your group. Most discussions are structured as small group conversations followed by large-group debriefs, in order to provide participants with a more comfortable context for sharing personal stories and perspectives. However, if you have fewer than six participants, you might choose to run all discussions with the whole group.

Module Videos

In addition to following the suggestions in the introductory session "Video Viewing Tips" handout, it will be particularly helpful for you, as the leader, to watch both videos in each module once or twice ahead of time so that you are familiar with the interaction and content and can anticipate the observations and insights your participants might share.

Homework

The intent of the homework for each module is to give participants an opportunity to develop skills in professional noticing and exhibit facilitation—paying attention to how personal experiences and assumptions shape facilitation approaches, observing families to understand their needs and interests, and trying out and reflecting on different facilitation strategies. Although we strongly recommend incorporating the homework into the professional development program, as with the warm-up activities, use your best judgment regarding how to use the homework relative to how much time participants will have between each module.