

Whose Knowledge Counts?

Rethinking Museum Authority Through Teen-Led Curatorial Practice

Teen Museum Council (TMC) of the
SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL PORTRAIT
GALLERY PRESENTATION

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RECOGNITION: WHERE POWER BEGINS

Starting the TMC

Recognizing Youth as Stakeholders

Every successful youth engagement program begins with a moment of recognition—a point at which an institution acknowledges the significance of teen presence, initiative, and representation. This recognition is not merely symbolic; it is the foundation for shifting institutional power dynamics. When teens are seen not as visitors but as stakeholders, they become participants in shaping the museum's narrative.

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EARLY STAGES: POWER AS TRANSACTION



Initial Power Dynamics

“What can I get?”

When youth are first invited into institutional spaces, they often enter with a transactional mindset: *What can I gain from this?* This is not a failure of teens but a reflection of power structures. When institutions retain control, teens are positioned as guests rather than decision-makers. Power, when it is finally offered, is perceived as something *granted* by adults rather than *earned* through agency.

Uh-oh... failure!

Adult-Directed, Teen-Supported Models

In early stages, power is often symbolic—teens might be given control over a few events or programs. But this power is precarious. When projects underperform (such as low-attendance events), accountability falls into a gray area: teens may blame adults for insufficient guidance, while adults may believe they have already “given enough” power.

Power is not possessed unless realized. Lack of realization over one’s power resulting in failure may stem from lack of confidence, more so than poor communication.

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BUILDING EPISTEMO LOGICAL POWER



I, We, Teens, Have Opinions

A Teen Portrait Competition

More meaningful involvement emerges when teens are trusted to shape not only outcomes but processes. For example, for the National Portrait Gallery's Teen Portrait Competition, while adults provided logistical support, the rubrics, jurying, and conceptual framing were led by teens. Even when institutional planning shifted the location of exhibition multiple times, teens taking on decision-making roles fostered a sense of ownership and epistemological authority.

\$150,000!

Teen-led Grant Initiative

Originating from a grant-writing workshop, teens took the lead in conceptualizing, writing, and positioning their own vision. With adult support, the proposal was submitted and ultimately won. This victory validated teen knowledge and expertise—both in understanding their own experiences and in shaping institutional priorities. By claiming their roles as experts on teen culture, teens positioned their voices as central rather than supplemental.

Chapter Conclusion:

Confidence is Key to Epistemological Power

Power can be seen as possessed once earned from realized through experiencing epistemological validation, it cannot necessarily be given or proclaimed because power is so intrinsically tied to confidence.

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THE RESPONSI BILITY PARADOX

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*Does gaining power make
teens more mature—or does
maturity earn them more
power?*

Navigating Change

Ownership is Great!

Or is it?

As youth gain more authority, their sense of ownership deepens. But increased power often comes with a tradeoff: optimism and creative fluidity can give way to institutional responsibility and risk management.

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IMAGINING
THE
FUTURE

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What's next?

“The creative adult is the child who survived.”

The future of the Teen Museum Council depends on navigating the balance between: preserving the energy and boldness of youth while embracing the accountability that comes with institutional authority. Sustainable teen leadership requires not only that institutions trust youth, but also that youth learn to wield power with both vision and responsibility.

THANK YOU

Whose Knowledge Counts?

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