

TOWARDS BEST PRACTICE IN DEVELOPING NEW AUDIENCES FOR MUSEUMS:

Results of a workshop on developing audiences and collections

21 June 2005 Manchester Museum



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The Audiences and Collections workshop

The workshop (June 2005 at Manchester Museum) was held to disseminate the work that members of the North West Museum Hub have been doing to build new audiences.

Museums have known for some time now that, in order to develop, we need to work with people who are not regular or confident users of museums. We need to find ways of inspiring people to come and engage with their collections. Many museums are developing innovative ways of doing this.

The focus of the day was on organisational learning, but also we wanted the day to maximise the opportunities for individual participants to learn. Contributors were briefed to be brutally honest about what worked and what didn't and were to make their presentation as lively as possible.

At the outset we asked participants to discuss what they hoped to achieve from the day. Some of these were:

- Inspiration
- Create partnerships
- Share ideas and experience
- Learn from mistakes
- Network face to face
- Pinch ideas!





**Developing New Audiences –
Chris Chadwick (Head of Development)
MLA North West and Nadine Andrews
(Audience Development Manager) Arts
About Manchester**

Chris Chadwick outlined the priorities of Renaissance in the Regions and the key regional and national bodies working in this area. She focused on the work of Arts About Manchester (AAM) and MLA North West, and the changes to strategic thinking that have come about through their joint work.

She discussed the audience development training run by AAM with MLA North West and its role in embedding audience development into organisations' core business planning. She went on to describe the Museum Development Fund, funded through Renaissance, that supports non-Hub museum projects.

Nadine Andrews then discussed Connecting Our Histories, a project which developed out of the Diversity Festival in 2003 and aims to attract new audiences through innovative research into collections, funded by the Museum Development Fund.

**Local Treasures – Jacqui Wallace
(Community Outreach Officer) Bolton
Museum and Art Gallery**

Local Treasures makes the collections of Bolton Museum and Art Gallery accessible and raises the museum's profile. It is an inter-generational project with hard to reach groups in communities using reminiscence, local and oral histories. More than twenty groups have been involved, ranging from residents' associations to community healthcare and the youth service.

Jacqui explained that strong relationships with individuals are essential for the work's development. Participants in the project were taken on organised trips to the museum and the work they have produced in response to the collections has been exhibited at the museum. Positive outcomes of the project include building community spirit and promoting confidence.

Trained as a community development worker, Jacqui brings skills to the work that are not always available within a museum's workforce. She concluded by suggesting that it is the people who are the local treasures, as well as the collections.

The Online Gallery – Liz Mitchell (On-line Gallery Curator) Manchester City Galleries

Liz's post was created in October 2004 to develop on-line resources for the collection. She has done a considerable amount of research and evaluation: a staff survey; a focus group consultation; a review of the existing ICT infrastructure; an evaluation of the existing website; a review of MCG organisational priorities; research into the e-learning agenda and setting up a staff group to look at documentation and interpretation issues.

She has looked at current website use, access to collections issues, and management of the 'digital object'. Her research has concluded that the website should enhance, support and expand the physical experience through pre and postvisit resources, enticements etc. and exploit the potential for novel experiences for audiences who may not necessarily visit the physical gallery.

The on-line gallery project has been both exciting and frustrating, defined, not by object or audience but by a single interpretation medium, which offers incredible possibilities.

From flat irons to floods – Susan Child (Community Outreach Officer) and Julie Wooding (Learning and Access Officer) Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle

The new community outreach officer's role is to promote Tullie House as a socially inclusive institution within the community. They have established links with local communities by organising family activity days, visits to community centres, handling collections, reminiscence boxes and oral history sessions.

The importance of flexibility in response to events was shown in the extreme when the project stopped due to the flooding of Carlisle. Volunteers, recruited from the Arts and Media College for the 'Flood Forum', and artists in the communities created FloodArt. 'Telling Lives' – Flood Stories, with Adult Education and the BBC, was developed as part of a government-wide initiative to address adult literacy.

It was felt that continuous learning and reflection make for best practice with community work. The project involved other council agencies with which they will develop further outreach opportunities. They hope to build on the successes and develop a core community programme, including a volunteer programme, and to extend this into the rural community.

Fine art interpretation – Francis Marshall (Keeper of Fine Art) and Greta Krypczyk-Oddy (Chair of the Friends of the Harris) Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston

Francis Marshall and Greta Krypczyk-Oddy described the consultation undertaken to help the museum plan the refurbishment of the fine art gallery. A group of people, over fifty years of age, were consulted about the hanging, the labels and what they would like to see. They visited Manchester Art Gallery and the Walker Art Gallery to see other approaches to interpretation. They learnt that the most favoured form of interpretation is through people.

Work with the group changed the mind of staff, to some extent, about the gallery and raised questions about under representation of ethnic groups. They hope to sustain the group, and integrate its work into the Audience Development Plan.



The re-display of the Whitworth's textile collection – Jennifer Harris (Curator Textiles and Deputy Director) and Anne French (Conservator, Textiles) Whitworth Art Gallery

The Whitworth is re-displaying its textile collection with funding through Renaissance. They consulted with key users about their views on the collection and the existing displays. Consultation highlighted a range of issues including the low light levels in the existing textile gallery, and the role or purpose of textiles in an art gallery.

In view of this, the gallery decided to spend the budget for the re-display not on conservation, as originally envisaged, but on lighting. The Whitworth's textile collection was assembled in the 1890s on aesthetic grounds, to shape taste of local designers and manufacturers. In the light of this, the new displays will focus on the aesthetics of the collection, rather than their context.

The consultation demonstrated the need to recognise different users and their needs; that people want to handle the textiles; the need to be more transparent about the level of access offered; the need to use the scholarship about the collection; and the need for training for front of house staff.

Collective Conversations – Bernadette Lynch (Head of Public Programmes and Academic Development) Lisa Harris (Curator of Anthropology) Gurdeep Thiara (Outreach Officer) Manchester Museum

Staff from the Manchester Museum discussed their programme, Collective Conversations, in which culturally diverse communities and individuals are filmed whilst they talk about what objects in the collections mean to them, based on their own knowledge and experiences.

Using this methodology, they hope to establish sustainable relationships with people, based on trust, and to "democratise" interpretation. This indicated a shift away from museum-based interpretation, to community or individual perceptions about the collections. Managing the project has been much more complicated than anticipated in so far as cross-departmental teams have had to be established. A film was shown of an amateur archaeologist, a group of Somalians and a group of Sudanese people talking about objects.

A model for best practice

At the end of the Audiences and Collections Workshop delegates discussed in groups what they had learnt from the day. We then gathered suggestions from them as to what they think are the vital things people should know, or should do, when working with new audiences.

Here are their suggestions:



General

- One size doesn't fit all – design your work to fit with your collections, staff expertise and organisational resources
- Don't raise expectations, amongst communities or staff, which can't be met.
- Be flexible – your final piece of work may be quite different from what you originally envisaged. This can be a good thing!
- Be led by your ideas, experience, collections and resources, rather than the available funding.
- Community based work is complex and should be long term – don't enter into it lightly, but do make a start!

Your organisation

- Your organisation has audiences at the heart of its vision; they are integral to business planning.
- You know who your audiences are and you respect them
- You have an audience development plan which informs the business plan at all levels of the organisation.
- Working with new audiences is embedded across your organisation. All of your staff are committed.
- Your workforce reflects the audiences you work with.

Your attitudes

- You enjoy working in teams that you facilitate rather than lead.
- You have a two-way dialogue with your partners – you listen to each other and you learn from each other.
- You acknowledge your audiences' skills and contributions
- You take nothing for granted

Partnerships

- In order to work with new audiences, you develop partnerships with individuals and with organisations.
- You share ownership of the partnership with your partners, but you may have a lead partner.
- You know about the differences between your organisation and your partners, as well as your similarities.
- You give something of yourself to the partnership; you are more than a spokesperson for your organisation.

Delivery

- Consultation is at the heart of your work with new audiences.
- You are an expert communicator with people who are not familiar with your expertise.
- You consult with your audiences and with professionals in other sectors (e.g. community workers).
- You are skilled in project management.
- You have realistic time schedules
- You allow time for reflection and comment
- You present choices to people, rather than a plan for them to fit into.
- You make sure you yourself have sufficient resources and emotional support to maintain what can be demanding work.

Collections

- You directly link your work with new audiences to your collections, or your buildings, which are the unique thing you can offer.

Sustainability

- You provide people with a route for progression beyond the life of the project or a skill or experience they can use.

Evaluation

- You do evaluation (formal and informal) in order to learn from your work.
- You share the results of evaluation (successes and challenges) with colleagues and use it to plan future work.

Evaluation of the workshop

The participants were asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of the day.



Most people said that the sessions had met their expectations and that they had enjoyed the day.

In response to being asked what was done well, many participants said that they particularly enjoyed the content and style of the presentations. They praised the variety of examples and presentations. Participants also enjoyed the grassroots aspect of the presentations, feeling that they conveyed integrity and honesty. When asked what could have been done better, there was a variety of answers. The most common criticism was that the timetable should have been more strictly adhered to. Most people said that the day was useful for them. Others described it as “a great experience, taking away the scary element of audience development”; “an opportunity for hub venues to demonstrate how good practice can be shared” and “useful chance for a small isolated museum to get in touch with what other museums are doing.” We also asked people what they would do as a result of participating in the workshop. Responses differed widely, but the most popular included:

- Give colleagues feedback
- Initiate projects
- Reflect on audience, identity and collaborative workings

In general, participants responded extremely positively to the experience, with many expressing their thanks and good wishes to those involved.

Learning from partnerships

Most of the work described in the Audiences and Collections Workshop involved partnerships. Partnerships working is a key part of the work of the NW Hub. Many people feel they learn how to do partnerships by reflection and learning 'on the job'. But it can be hard to make the time to do that reflection. There is a vast literature on partnership working.

Here are a few websites that offer some guidance.

The Ties that Bind – Partnership and Collaboration

This was a conference (2003) organised by the Tavistock Institute. The conference looked below the surface at the frustrations and tensions that can arise from partnership working. A summary of the proceedings can be found on their website (in 'professional development').

www.tavistock.org

The **Inspiring Learning for All** website has a section on partnerships (in 'go further'). There are basic tips on what makes partnerships work well and case study documents to download.

www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk

The Prince's Trust Making Partnerships Work

This is both a study of partnership working in the Prince's Trust and a ten step practical guide to building and maintaining effective partnerships

www.princes-trust.org.uk

Talking Partnerships Toolkit

This draws on the experience of people working on the Image and Identity project, which brought together twelve partners (mostly galleries) working with young people and communities on this theme.

www.semlac.org.uk

Resources

The Inspiring Learning for All (ILFA) website offers many resources to help you plan and deliver work with new audiences. ILFA has four key principles which describe the characteristics of an accessible and inclusive museum, library or archive that stimulates and supports learning. The key principles are people; places; partnerships; policies, plans and performance. ILFA can help you develop your organisation so that it is equipped to do this work. See for instance the Checklists, which help you to assess how well you are doing in relation to the good practice processes described in Inspiring Learning for All.

www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk

There are many documents on how to evaluate in a museum or gallery context. This is a particularly helpful one and is available free: Felicity Woolf Partnerships for Learning. A guide to evaluating arts education projects Arts Council 2004 (Telephone 01235 465500 or download from www.artscouncil.org.uk)

There are many evaluation reports of programmes of work with new audiences. A particularly useful one is: Hannah Gould, What did we learn this time? The museums and galleries lifelong learning initiative 2002-3 (Campaign for Learning in Museums/DfES nd). A candid account of this experimental programme – what works and what doesn't? A follow up publication, Where are they now? (Campaign for Learning in Museums/DfES nd), looks at the longer-term impact of the programme on both the museums and the learners.

How to get in touch

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