The Centre for Higher Education Research, Innovation and Learning (CHERIL)

Public Engagement and Cultural Professionals' Mentoring in Course Assessment and Feedback

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Final Report

Project Aims

The project aimed to explore the pedagogic benefits and practical challenges of including cultural practitioners' contribution in co-designing and assessing student work that has a real-life element. In more detail, the project aims to examine the value, benefits and challenges of:

- student mentoring by cultural practitioners and their involvement in assessment/feedback;
- the realisation of student proposals (from paper-based assignments to real-life collaborative projects) and how it affects teaching, learning and assessment;
- object-based learning as an interface between teaching and public engagement;
- embedding social responsibility in teaching, learning and assessment; and
- the benefits and challenges of using 'Quality Metrics' to assess student work that integrates social responsibility and public engagement.

Methodology

In Semester 1 2016-17, 35 MA Art Gallery and Museum Studies students performed a range of collections management and interpretation tasks with about 35 objects from the University's Museum of Medicine and Health (MMH). With the help of staff in The Manchester Museum and The Whitworth, students researched medical objects, assessed their conservation needs, examined the long-term sustainability of the collection, proposed possible uses of the collection and examined collaborations between the MMH and other local cultural organisations. They were also produced a pop-up exhibition of the objects in the Central Library (December 2016).

This work then informed the development of a public engagement project proposal by each student to engage one of the following audiences with objects of medicine and health: researchers (university students & staff); a local community (e.g. patient groups/charities); and secondary schools. Three experienced practitioners (Sally Fort, Jennifer Kavanagh, and Stephanie Seville) mentored students during the preparation of their proposals (Nov-Dec 2016). This included two face-to-face meetings and accompanying email correspondence between students and mentors. The mentors advised students on the rationale and aims of the public engagement activity, considering its target audience(s), issues of funding and

fundraising, marketing and publicity and evaluation. Following that, three project proposals were selected by ICP staff, mentors and MMH to be commissioned over Semester 2 and Summer 2017. These included:

'Eye Spy the Museum of Medicine and Health!' Case Study
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XgUDk-Bs7A

The activity was the Museum of Medicine and Health's contribution to the University wide Community Festival taking place on the 17th June 2017. It linked in with the University's 'social responsibility' initiative and aimed to engage local families and children with issues to do with eye health, vision, and eye anatomy. This was done using the Museum's collection to facilitate an object handling session with objects specifically relating to past eye treatments and vision tests. There were also interactive activities such as a craft table with mirrors for visitors to draw their own eyes and label the different anatomical elements and an optical illusion table, where visitors were encouraged to study illusions to see the different elements within the images and an explanation of why/how eyes see these illusions. The activities were accompanied with resources from the College of Optometrists regarding children's eye health, presbyopia, eye donation and vision testing.

Ornamentation and The Art of the Ceramic Medical object
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkP5pfVmDSo
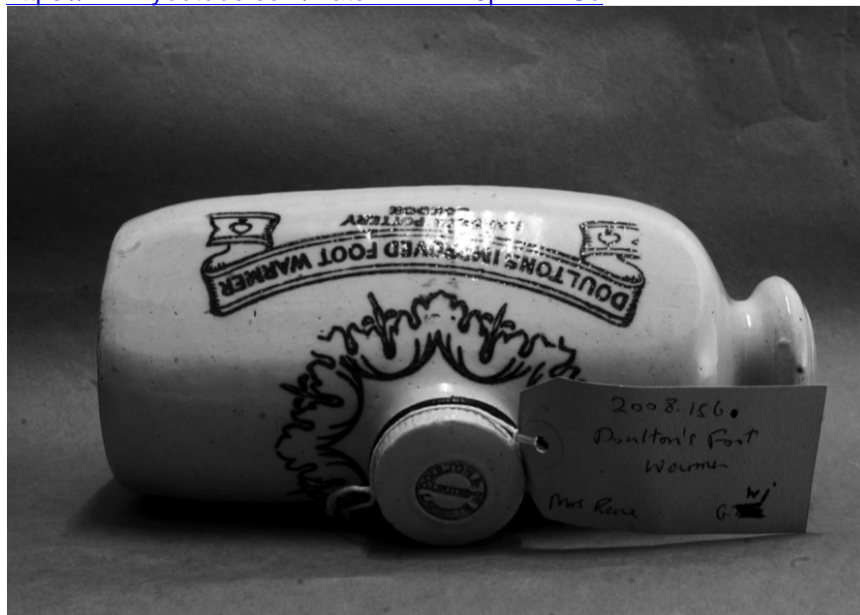
This aimed to be a small handling event to engage members of the Northern Ceramic Society using ceramic vessels from the Manchester Museum of Medicine and Health. The purpose of this project was to promote the collection and its potential to inspire a dialogue about the significance of ornamentation in pharmaceutical objects in the late 18th to the mid 19th century. The event featured three examples of British ceramic manufactured for medical purposes and included one work of ceramic art that embodied the role of ornamentation as a distinguishing feature of ceramic medical objects

‘Remedy’

‘Remedy’ aimed to be a public engagement programme to engage the community of the University of Manchester, including staff and students, in a conversation about home remedies, health and wellbeing. The project aimed not only to make the visitors aware of the Manchester Museum of Medicine and Health collection, but to make these themes and issues relevant in their lives today and to consider their own health.

The commission involved students working with mentors and fellow students towards materialising their public engagement projects. The design and evaluation of these activities was based on Heritage Lottery Fund Activity and Evaluation plans and the ‘Quality Metrics framework’ (which uses self, peer and public assessment to capture the quality of cultural work). Course units questionnaires and interviews with mentors were used to evaluate the project.

Findings

By working with cultural professionals in the assessment and realisation of public engagement student proposals, the project addressed the following CHERIL aims:

Enhanced the quality of teaching through the involvement of cultural practitioners in practice-based learning that targets employability, student experience and SR.

The scope and depth of the contribution of the cultural professionals in supporting students in the preparation, execution and evaluation of their public engagement projects was a clear benefit, both for the students and the course itself. The mentors brought in the course expertise and experience from recent and past public engagement work. They were able to quickly spot issues and gaps in the students' practical considerations about their public engagement activity and accordingly advise them. One of the main issues was that most students underestimated the resources and time required to project manage such activities. Also, some public engagement proposals were expecting too much of visitors/audiences and didn't build it stakeholder management time. The mentors were able to identify those issues in the student proposals and discuss with students the implications of those issues. Indeed, in the unit assessment, students highlighted the benefit of working with the mentors and how this collaborative work helped them understand better issues involved in real-life public engagement work.

The involvement of cultural practitioners enriched theoretical museology with criteria and learning outcomes related to professional tacit knowledge and experience and through that enhanced the design, assessment and feedback practices of our courses.

This was one of the key aims of the project. It was also its biggest challenge. The tutor and mentors spent considerable time discussing and comparing different models of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. We tried to identify practical and effective ways of embedding in the MA curriculum (parts of) assessment and evaluation frameworks that are used in the cultural sector. The main challenge here has been to bridge expectations and requirements of academic writing with the information and formatting often required in the cultural sector. In the trial public engagement proposals we tried to steer students towards combining the two in main body of the assignment. This hasn't worked as effectively as we would have liked. The students found it challenging moving from one "mode of thinking" to another and this led to some either thin arguments or inefficient explanation of the practicalities involved in the public engagement proposals. On reflection and moving forward, we're now looking at assignments that separate the two elements, whereby the academic essay becomes a reflective piece of writing on the practical proposal; and accordingly apply two sets of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. This is to be applied in the course running in Semester 1 2018-19.

Enabled deeper and more enquiring forms of student learning by allowing students to co-produce a real-life project, through which they gained practical experience, developed career and transferrable skills and built their professional profiles.

The co-production of a real-life project for the three students who commissioned to do it was a very useful part of the initiative. It was very clear that the students found this part of the project very rewarding, both academically and professionally. As we all (mentors and

tutor) observed, the projects helped the students accelerate their career and employability skills with the MA's framework. The project helped them build their confidence in themselves and in their ability to apply their MA learning to the design, execution and evaluation of the public engagement project.

However, this wasn't a straightforward process. The MA's timeframe, teaching schedule and deadlines worked, in the end, against the materialisation of the public engagement projects. Students struggled to combine the two; and in one of the cases ("Remedy"), the project didn't materialise in the end, due to partly the timing of the event (September) and partly due to relevant stakeholders pulling out of the project at the last minute. Moving forward, we are considering how to address the needs and requirements of real-life cultural engagement activity within the timeframes and limitations of 1 year FT MA course. For example, we're currently discussing turning the Semester long practical work into a year-long one, which we think might be of use also to other MAs in the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures.

Films
- **'Eye Spy the Museum of Medicine and Health!' Case Study**
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XgUDk-Bs7A
- **Ornamentation and The Art of the Ceramic Medical object**
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkP5pfVmDSo
- **Stories of Change: 70 Years of the NHS**
  https://youtu.be/E5ffm_NlhQA
- **Healing Histories Exhibition Installation**
  https://youtu.be/HJ68nW85BAo

Issues, Challenges and Implications

Other observed issues, challenges and implications include:

- Working with mentors/cultural professionals that have some understanding of HEIs and University curriculum is crucial. All three mentors we worked with had this understanding, which allowed us and them to develop a shared "language" during the project.
- The mentors' engagement with the course needs to start before the start of the semester and extend beyond the end of the particular module. For the collaboration between students and mentors to work best, mentors need to be introduced to the students in advance and have some bonding exercises.
- Dipping in and out of the MA is an additional challenge for mentors. Keeping them involved in different capacities would address some of the issues that a fragmented experience of the course causes.
- Designing, executing and evaluating a real-life cultural engagement project in the timeframe of an MA module is particularly challenging, as mentioned above. The particular challenge in this case was that the project was an extra-curriculum activity, which added further complexity. Making it part of the curriculum and extending it into, possibly, a year-long project is advisable; though there is the option of scaling it down to fit the specifications of a 12-week module.

- Managing expectations by students and cultural partners is key. Working with cultural partners one has worked before helps; as does co-designing the activity with them.
- Bridging academic learning outcomes and assessment criteria with evaluation frameworks followed in the cultural sector requires thinking about academic assessment in flexible and open ways. Trying to completely merge the two is particularly difficult; and possibly not desirable. Separating the critical reflecting element from the practice-based/operational plan offers a clearer structure for both students and examiners.
- There is a lot of potential of using this experience to inform public engagement and cultural professionals' mentoring in assessment and feedback in other UG and PGT courses in the School and the Faculty. The next stage for us is to compare our experiences with colleagues involved in similar work in other subject areas (e.g. Drama, Music, Art History).
- The University Finance systems don't seem to be geared towards the needs and realities of freelancers. The payment system is far too complicated and time-consuming. In the case of one of the mentors, the Finance office kept not acknowledging the individual as a freelancer, which became such an issue that the collaboration with the mentor almost fell through.
- The budget was kept at the specified level. On reflection, we'd budget for more mentor interaction with students. Moving forward, we are trying to assess whether our standard budget can cover such mentor involvement in parts of our curriculum, though this is going to be challenging, in the context of real-life cultural engagement projects. It would be more sustainable in the case of students developing proposals for such projects.