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New approaches to collections-based learning: getting students into university museums

Many university staff and students never set foot inside their campus museums. This is often not a reflection upon the museum itself, but on the flawed perceptions of the role of museums, galleries and collections in academia.

In the past museum learning practice and theory has focussed too heavily on the subject of formal school education. However, in the UK recent initiatives such as 'Inspiring Learning for All' (set up by the Museums Libraries and Archives Commission) have attempted to create a learning model which promotes self-directed life long learning in museums, archives, libraries and galleries. Despite this HE (Higher Education) is rarely mentioned in relation to museum learning. Equally, teaching and learning theory in higher education often sets HE apart from other types of learning.

However, the new focus on self-directed learning and the acquisition of transferable skills in HE has much in common with current developments in museum learning. In this paper I will present a case study from the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) at the University of Reading which demonstrates how supporting collections-based self-directed learning can help to integrate university museums into HE institutions and put HE back on the museum learning agenda.

The University of Reading

As my colleague Kate Arnold-Forster will illustrate the University of Reading holds a diverse range of collections. The collections were set up primarily for teaching and research. However, over the last 50 years they have been used less and less for this purpose.

Over the past ten years the University of Reading has enjoyed a regeneration of its collections. We have a number of excellent

learning programmes but at present these are focussed on engaging with the local community. This has led staff and students to stereotype museum learning as consisting of 'groups of school kids'.

At MERL this is a growing concern. For as a university museum, established as a research collection, our aim is not only to serve the public but also to be a centre for research and undergraduate learning.

The background to my post

My post of Undergraduate Learning Officer was created as part of the answer to this problem. The post is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) scheme. For those not familiar with this scheme, it funds the setting up of centres in UK universities with the dual aims of rewarding excellent teaching practice and investing in the further development of that practice.

A CETL in Applied Undergraduate Research Skills was set up at Reading to develop student's ability to think independently and critically through engagement with primary research. One of the ways that this is being achieved is through utilising the University's outstanding museums and collections.

Alongside MERL the Archaeology, Zoology, Agriculture and Typography departments are part of this Centre. We are not the only ones conducting collections based projects. Zoology is developing a CD-rom using the Cole Museum of Zoology's collections to develop species identification skills in students. Additionally the Typography department is working to integrate their ephemera collection into departmental teaching. So our work is part of a much wider drive to embed collections based research into the undergraduate curriculum.

Teaching Logistics

One of our objectives is to develop collections-based undergraduate teaching at MERL. However the logistics of this have proven to be as important as the content itself in ensuring the sustainability of this project.

The museum is not situated in or linked with an academic department which has caused problems in the past. This may seem like a minor point, but administratively it meant that the museum was providing teaching on demand but not receiving resources via the student figures, which could be used to get extra staff to support that teaching.

We are now offering optional modules via an academic department. They will be responsible for administration and quality assessment while we deliver teaching for a split of resources. This will put us in stronger position when justifying the necessity of my post beyond the range of this external funding.

Practice

It is key that this teaching is not just a traditional lecture and library style programme delivered in a museum. All our teaching is focussed around getting students to use our resources whether it be the archives, the objects or the museum display itself.

After talking with various academic departments it was decided that teaching would have a material culture and museum studies focus, as it is appealing to students and cuts across a number of disciplines. We are offering optional 'modules' (which last for 10 weeks) across degree programmes in History of Art, Archaeology, History and Classics.

We have three modules at the moment but are hoping to develop more subject specific teaching as time goes on. These brief descriptions should give a taster of the kind of teaching we are developing.

First year 'Analysing Museum Displays' enables students to use MERL and other campus museums' permanent exhibitions to critique the construction of history and identity in museum displays. Third year 'Object Analysis and Museum Interpretation' allows students to research parts of our object collection. And another third year module on 'Museum Theory, History and Ethics' uses archival documents to enable students to undertake their own research projects in museum archives.

What I would like to stress with this outline is that we are not simply trying to lecture in a museum. We are trying to get students to utilise the collections in developing self-directed research. In this way we aim to make use of these exceptional resources, to enrich student learning and to make museums and collections a major part of university life.

UROP

Another way the CETL is trying to achieve this is by establishing the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme. This enables students to undertake independent research projects and is based on similar schemes at MIT, UCL and Warwick. The best students are able to apply for a summer bursary to work on a research project of our choosing. This takes place at the end of their second year so that the skills they develop can be used in their dissertation research. In other universities there is evidence that this has impacted on final dissertation grades of the students involved.

At MERL this programme is being used to allow students to work with original objects and archives to create resources that will aid future student and academic researchers. For example, one student has been cataloguing and creating research guides to our museums archives, which can now be used for teaching and future research. Our success story is that one of our students has found a part-time third year job with a national company that she worked with as part of one of these projects. In this way the programme benefits the students, the museum and the wider academic community.

Volunteers

The UROP programme is linked to the other major method of encouraging students to work with collections: volunteering. In the past volunteering has often been on an ad hoc basis with few records kept of student's activities. This is a common situation in many UK museums.

With the creation of the post of Volunteer Development Officer we have made volunteer work more rewarding for both students and staff. Students sign up for specific projects rather than just 'showing up and doing whatever is available'. They are trained for

specific tasks and work at specific times. This teaches them to be more self-sufficient, gives them new skills and prepares them for the world of work.

We vary the tasks and try to expand student's range of experience. We also give advice on careers post-university. We keep files on every volunteer, listing all their training and activities, and act as referees for any job applications. We are hoping to turn this scheme into an internal qualification which will be added to student's degree transcripts. In this way we are able to benefit from volunteers activities while also offering students the chance to develop transferable skills as they are undertaking their degree.

Summary

In the title of this paper I promised new approaches to collections-based learning. However, you could level the charge against me that none of these methods are unique. Instead of re-inventing the wheel we are borrowing best practice from the world of museums, museum learning and Higher Education. In collaboration with museum and teaching staff we are creating a model which works for our situation: a model that meets not only the museum's learning, but also its research agenda. In this way we hope to make our collections an essential part of undergraduate life and to raise awareness of the untapped potential of university museums.