

For, With, On: What research do museums, galleries and heritage organizations 'need'?

Leeds Workshop: 13th November 2013

What makes research useful?

Tim Boon, Head of Research and Public History, Science Museum

- Role for primary, original research in developing museum programmes.
- Need to be aware of the best relevant academic literature: 'It is not enough to retell old narratives, we need to tell new stories'.
- Museum visitor research has focused too much on what visitors don't know. This has led to bland exhibitions in the name of comprehension without an understanding of the knowledge and insights visitors bring with them to museums.
- Museums have done a lot of research but only for internal use. Need for this to be published.

Camilla Nichol, Head of Collections, Leeds Museums and Galleries

- Original research can lead to a whole range of public programmes for all ages and shows that research need not just be shared through academic papers.
- Research also gives us space to challenge our preconceptions, develop our practice and question our ethics.
- That means research can be 'for' us, 'with' us and 'on' us...

Georgina Young, Senior Curator, Contemporary London/Paul Hamlyn Fellow in Arts and Participation (Clare Leadership Programme)

- Currently has three overlapping identities including researching 'associative democracy and museums'.
- Research enables creativity and innovation through working with people beyond the museum, from different disciplines and with different starting points.
- Research is about seeing a bigger picture – how organisational power works.
- Research is also a form of reflexive practice: 'My research is about the democratic underpinning of museums' legitimacy'.

Professor Keri Facer, Arts and Humanities Research Council Connected Communities Leadership Fellow

- Both museums and universities are currently facing serious existential threats. The danger here is that research becomes defensive – of using each other to prove our value'.
- We're in the '21st Century Canyon' - facing significant economic, environmental, demography and technological change and we are in a '21st Century Garden' - where there is increasing collaboration and self-organising to address problems and share interests.
- How do we engage publics together in creative and disruptive ways? What are the different strengths of universities and museums?
- New generations of researchers and curators are seeking out meaning in their work through activist and highly engaged roles. Need to think how to support those collaborations.

We began with four short interventions...

Key quotes...

Georgina Young: 'Doing research enables me to see when the organisation is assuming authority and allows me to think differently about this process and to challenge it.'

Tim Boon: 'Collaboration involves curators being as engaged with academic discourse as we want university researchers to be about the pragmatics of achieving real impact on the floor of museums'

Workshop discussions

1

Dangers of defensive research – where universities use museums for ‘impact’ and museums use universities to ‘cover up the bleeding wounds’ (!) of the loss of curatorial expertise.

2

Frustrations with the apparently lack of top-down strategy in universities (e.g. museums being contacted by lots of different researchers from the same HEI). Yet, at the same time, there was a celebration of the the creativity which is made possible by bottom up passions and the chemistry of personal connections. Need to consider the relationship between strategic direction and enabling many flowers to bloom.

35 people from museums, heritage organisations and universities discussed the issues...

Key quotes...

3

Different sizes of museum or heritage organization/group cannot equally access the benefits of research. Possible need for brokering relationship (By AHRC? Or by museums with Independent Research Organization status?)

4

Need for a recognition of the different funding situations for universities and museums in terms of costing in of staff time on RCUK grants and that, in any case, it can be very hard for museum staff to be backfilled.

Camilla Nichol: 'Research isn't just about academic papers. We need greater recognition of the whole range of public outcomes. Original research can and should inform sessions, whether there are for MA Students or families'

5

The distinctions between ‘for’, ‘with’, ‘on’ crumbled quickly in discussion – but there was a hope that open and confident organisations could use collaboration to actively welcome in new insights, identification of power and inequality and the challenging or critique of practices.

6

There is a skills gap in both univiersities and museums. Skills of collaboration need to be part of training at all levels in both sectors.

Keri Facer: ‘How can we rethink and reframe research as not defensive? How might universities and museums work together to collectively build the democratic knowledge we will need in the 21st Century?’

7

But also...there is the possibility of identifying an exciting and game-changing shared research agendas – whether around exploring public value or a reimagining the roles of both museums and universities in 21st century.

Join a mailing list to discuss research in museums, galleries and heritage: <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/museumsgalleriesheritageresearch>
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