Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Whose cake is it anyway?

A collaborative investigation into engagement and participation in 12 museums and galleries in the UK

Summary Report

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phf

Contents

Foreword 2

Introduction 3

Executive summary 5

Project overview 9

Project findings: the practice of engagement 11

Conclusion: active partnerships versus empowerment-lite? 20

Appendix 1. Background to the report 23

Appendix 2. Methodology 25

Appendix 3. Organisational contacts 26

Foreword

In 2009, Paul Hamlyn Foundation commissioned Dr. Bernadette Lynch[1] to work with a study group of 12 museums and their community partners across the UK, to gauge the real nature and effectiveness of the engagement practices of museums and galleries. We are delighted to publish this report by Dr. Lynch, summarising her work with the study group. We acknowledge the work undertaken by these institutions and their partners, and thank them for the openness and trust they demonstrated during the research process, which revealed many fundamental issues that are not often discussed within the museums sector.

The outcomes of this research will help the Foundation, and other funding bodies, to direct future support to the area of deepening participation and meaningful engagement in our museums and galleries. We hope you will find this report an interesting and useful read, and that it will fuel debate about issues which we believe are vitally important.

Kate Brindley
Director, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art
Advisor, Paul Hamlyn Foundation Arts Programme Committee

[1] Dr. Bernadette Lynch has many years' experience in senior management of museums in the UK and Canada, specialising in the theory and practice of engagement and participation. She is now a freelance writer, researcher and consultant to museums and galleries and lectures widely on the subject of participation and active engagement. The photographs on pages 17 and 19 are courtesy of the author, taken during the workshops she ran during the research programme.

Introduction

In 2009, Paul Hamlyn Foundation[2] commissioned a study of engagement in museums and art galleries. Focusing on UK museums and galleries of varying sizes and governance, all of which are well known for their commitment to public engagement, it asked staff and community partners what was understood by engagement and participation in these organisations, how well it was working, and where these museums and galleries thought their public engagement work was heading.

A confidential process that applied participatory theatre techniques[3] allowed professionals and community partners from the museums and galleries to open up courageously to dialogue and debate. Most importantly, it allowed trust to develop and thus for very frank views to be exchanged and examined collaboratively. What happened frequently surprised all involved.

As a result of this process, in early 2011 the Foundation supported a further series of 'surgeries' for each of the organisations to begin to plan a process of change. Some of the organisations have since formed clusters around particular areas of practice such as inter-arts and inter-agency working, transferable skills and capability-development, and strategic partnerships with local organisations and local authorities. These clusters are already engaged in exciting out-of-the-box thinking about new organisational models and partnership processes. For some, it has meant refocusing on their community foundations, reaffirming the sense of collaboration with their local communities that helped establish the organisation in the first place.

Participating organisations

The organisations taking part in this research project were:

- Belfast Exposed
- Bristol Museums
- Museum of East Anglian Life
- Glasgow Museums (Open Museum Service)
- Hackney Museum, London
- Lightbox, Surrey
- Museum of London

[2] Paul Hamlyn Foundation works across three UK programmes: Social Justice, Education and Learning, and the Arts. The mission of the Foundation is to maximise opportunities for individuals and communities to realise their potential and to experience and enjoy a better quality of life, now and in the future. In particular, the Foundation is concerned with children and young people and with disadvantaged people. In the study 'Engagement at the heart of museums and galleries', the Foundation wished to consider whether, within the Arts Programme, there may be scope to help promote the health and development of the museums and galleries sector in the UK. For further background, see Appendix 1. For information about the Arts Programme or any other aspect of Paul Hamlyn Foundation's work, see www.phf.org.uk.

[3] See A. Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, London: Pluto Press 1979, and also A. Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, London: Routledge 2006.

- National Museums Wales
- Manchester Museum
- Ryedale Folk Museum, Yorkshire
- Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (Laing Gallery and Discovery Museum)
- Wolverhampton Arts and Heritage Service

This set of urban and rural museums and galleries from across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales thus includes two large national museum services, medium and larger local authority urban services (a couple with multiple sites), a university museum and some smaller independent museums and galleries.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to Paul Hamlyn Foundation for the initiation and support of the study ‘Engagement at the heart of museums and galleries’, and especially to the courageous staff and community partners of the museums and galleries involved, who provided a model of fearless, open discussion of their public engagement practice.

Executive summary

In one of the study's workshops, a participant portrayed the museum as a cake, held by museum staff members as community participants formed an orderly queue to receive their allotted slice. The scene prompted one participant to ask, "whose cake is it anyway?"

If our museums and galleries are, as this metaphor suggests, owned, produced and distributed by staff to a passive public, decades of participation-targeted investment has not hit the mark. Communities remain, or at least perceive themselves to be, fundamentally separated from processes within these organisations: rather than engaging at every level of their work, they are relegated to mere consumption of museums' and galleries' 'products'.

Despite presenting numerous examples of ground-breaking, innovative practice, the funding invested in public engagement and participation in the UK's museums and galleries has not significantly succeeded in shifting the work from the margins to the core of many of these organisations. In fact, as this study demonstrates, it has curiously done the opposite. By providing funding streams outside of core budgets, it appears to have helped to keep the work on the organisations' periphery. This situation becomes even clearer now that external funding streams are under serious threat and museums and galleries are scrambling for alternative sources of short-term funding to support their public engagement work. Rather than further relegating participation to the margins, however, this could be an opportunity to mainstream this work and refocus on longer-term impact and solutions.

Getting 'under the skin'

It was the intention of the project to get beyond the numerous and well-publicised accounts of innovative short-term projects from the 12 well-reputed organisations in the study. It was therefore decided that creating an opportunity for staff members and community partners to come together, step back and reflect on the work was paramount. Facilitating organisations coming together within a safe environment to reflect and comment on each other's engagement practice was the second most important element of the approach.

Using Augusto Boal's methods of participatory drama, to which they had been introduced as part of the study, groups of staff members and community partners in each of the 12 locations developed and enacted scenes in which they described their organisations' consultation and collaboration efforts. Such participatory drama methods facilitate reflexivity and professional self-analysis and, in this case, allowed the organisations and their community partners to challenge effectively their own habits of mind and ways of working. A range of other methodologies, including questionnaires, discussion and 'Dragons' Den' panel presentations were used (see Appendix 2). Thus this investigation of participation used participatory methodologies to get 'under the skin' of public engagement and participation in the 12 museums and galleries.

Problems with project funding

The process opened up an evidently overdue discussion between senior management, staff members and their community partners. Given the opportunity to step back from the pressures of delivery, a number of committed staff members revealed a degree of disillusionment. It was explained that this was primarily brought about by the 'short-termism' of projects and the frequent lack of strategic planning for engagement work, particularly so as to involve the organisation as a whole.

Despite a shared understanding between the 12 organisations of the realities of sourcing funding to support public engagement, 'national initiative overload' was very often cited as deeply problematic. Across many of the organisations there was a consistent feeling of pressure to produce positive reports in the form of advocacy to secure further funding, rather than taking the time to reflect on the work. Working in this way was seen by many as undermining the integrity of the work, particularly in terms of the work being embedded in local needs, and long-term local relations. The study also found a level of insecurity amongst some front-line staff as their organisations' commitment to the work (and their jobs) have, with recent pressures on external funding, come into question.

The overall impression from these accounts is that, despite a record of excellent project work across the organisations and the undoubted passion and commitment of staff members, there remains a significant level of disillusionment and disengagement, and an overall lack of direction to the work. Many of the staff members talked about feeling 'stuck' (a word frequently repeated), unable to escape the merry-go-round of projects that were not having the long-term local impact desired.

Community members describe experience of 'empowerment-lite'

For some of the museums' and galleries' community partners, there were questions about the commitment of the organisations to the development of long-term and sustainable community relationships. In some cases, the organisation's knowledge of local needs and opportunities was plainly not what it could be, with an assumption of information coming in rather than having in place a proactive system of finding out. In one case, some potentially key strategic partners shared the same building as the museum and yet complained of having no relationship with the organisation.

In a few cases, at the far end of a wide spectrum of poor to excellent practice (often within the same organisation), there was a feeling expressed by some community partners of being 'used' by their museums and galleries as a means to access further funding. For others, while praising the museum's or gallery's efforts at 'reaching out' to their local communities, the organisation's claims of community collaboration and reciprocity seemed, to their community partners, to be somewhat exaggerated.

Overall, the greatest difficulty expressed by a number of community partners surrounded the issues of collaboration and co-production, with offers of participation typically amounting to the disillusioning experience of 'empowerment-lite'.[4]

Smaller organisations take the lead in community relations

There were some smaller organisations in the study with committed leadership and a clear direction that the whole organisation actively embraced. These organisations were embedded in their local communities. They understood that the focus of engagement work was not in terms of treating their community partners as *beneficiaries* but as *active partners*. The challenge now for these museums and galleries is to articulate their way of working for others, while further supporting its growth and sustainability within their own frequently under-funded organisation.

The question is: could such practice be scaled up to be a model for the larger organisations? The study concluded that the 'ways of working' in these smaller organisations had definite potential to be applied within larger museum or gallery services. With support, these examples have the capacity to help redefine good practice and could play an important mentoring role for others. The study also clearly acknowledges that each organisation's circumstances – and the nature of its communities – vary a great deal: there will never be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution. In addition, it is noted that the larger organisations, as one community partner put it, "serve many masters".

Elements of good practice in most of the organisations

Despite the difficulties faced by many, there were elements of exciting, new, creative thinking across all 12 organisations. Some had embarked on the road of reorganisation and restructuring (including changes to governance) to set the process of embedding the work in motion (National Museums Wales; Museum of London). Others had begun thinking 'out-of-the-box' for new sustainable ways of working that clearly focused on local community outcomes (Museum of East Anglian Life; Ryedale Folk Museum), or brokering new cross-sector and inter-arts partnerships (Glasgow's Open Museum; Belfast Exposed) and better community intelligence via an active role on neighbourhood councils and closer, more productive relations with local authorities (Wolverhampton Arts and Heritage Service), or carefully thought-through community consultation and co-production (Hackney Museum and Tyne & Wear Discovery Museum). There were elements of good practice throughout the study and, among these 12 organisations committed to public engagement, there is not one that cannot make a claim to some aspects of very good practice.

[4] A. Cornwall, *Democratising Engagement: What the UK Can Learn from International Experience*, London: Demos 2008.

Time for a reappraisal of engagement

Yet, for the majority of these museums and galleries, now facing cuts to outreach departments or scrambling for new sources of short-term funding to support public engagement and participation, the time is ripe for a root and branch review of the purpose and fundamental goal of this work. The majority of the organisations in the study have welcomed this honest debate. They share a desire for change and are ready and willing to embark on the formation of new plans to embed the work across the organisation, while renegotiating the organisation's contribution to local community development.

'Critical friends' help bring about change

Echoing the majority of opinion, the study therefore proposes the end of a dependency on centralised short-term project funding. It suggests a new way of understanding engagement and participation as central to the work of museums and galleries within their locality. Focusing on embedding local collaboration and developing individual capability for participation rather than 'empowerment-lite', the work becomes firmly situated in the organisation's locality and developed with the help of new, long-term community partnerships as 'critical friends'. Thus, a process of real change can only be set in motion through participation, both as the means and long-term purpose of the work. By shifting the concept of public engagement to focus on capability development through the active participation of local communities, it becomes clear that this active participation must be central to helping the organisation bring about change, with local people taking responsibility for their museum or gallery, and gaining valuable experience of active citizenship in the process. The 'critical friends' relationship characteristic of the study, between museum and gallery professionals and between organisations and their local community partners, thus becomes central to organisational change in museums and galleries.

Project overview

Following decades of investment in participation in UK museums and galleries, this study's main objective was to work with staff and community partners of 12 UK museums and galleries, all of which shared a commitment to, and reputation for, community participation. The study took a critical look at how these organisations understand their community engagement and how embedded community engagement had become within the organisation; like Brighton Rock, it asked, is engagement really through and through?

Museums continue to operate within a competitive funding culture which breeds a lack of openness. There was a significant level of trust and confidentiality negotiated in order to create a space for the degree of open discussion necessary for this study to operate. In such a competitive climate, it took courage for these organisations to be willing to share these issues with community partners and with each other, an agreement made in return for a high level of confidentiality.[5] Information would not be used to create a table of rated organisations, nor to present organisations solely as 'case-studies'. Instead, the process focused on three main areas:

- The experience of community partners
- The experience of museum and gallery staff
- Examples of change in action: transformative and transferable practice

Participatory techniques

Many of the workshops' group activities revolved around Augusto Boal's concepts of participatory drama. Staff members and community partners developed and acted out scenes which communicated how they perceived elements of their engagement practice. The process is based on "understanding, knowing by experience and experimenting", seeking to expand participants' "capacity to recognise, to apprehend and to learn".

As well as this enactment, workshops utilised a wider range of participatory practices, including:

- Committing to an open discussion between staff and community members, about varying degrees of engagement practice
- Imagining how it feels to be in someone else's position, a process which uncovered unspoken relations and differing assumptions

[5] Other than noting positive transformative or transferable practice shared between many of the organisations in the study, none of the organisations are specifically identified here in terms of a critical analysis of their engagement work. This is to encourage the continuation of mutually supportive processes of change and avoid a hierarchy of practice, which was *not* the intention of the study. However, all the organisations involved saw the full, unabridged report and had the chance to obtain feedback on their organisation's engagement practice in special group meetings, organisational 'surgeries' and planning sessions, subsequently organised by Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

- An organisational questionnaire developed and completed by participants
- Discourse analysis – a review of policy and organisational documents
- Contribution to a 'storywall' following all exercises, with entries added to an online blog
- One-to-one interviews to gauge anonymous views of participants
- A 'Dragon's Den' process, in which organisations presented their ways of working to staff and community partners from other organisations, who acted as 'critical friends', challenging and interrogating

Each organisation worked with a group of at least ten participants comprising equal numbers of staff and community partners. Representing a wide range of experience, the community members (some relieved to be asked) enthusiastically contributed to understanding and delivered a useful critique based on their experience.

Need to talk it through

For museums and galleries embarking on new participatory work, there was often a feeling that much-needed communication was neglected. One staff member said that, at senior management level, there was a lack of willingness to address issues. *"The nature of the work we are undertaking is unknown and new – we have to review it continuously,"* they said. *"The linkages and connections we are making are often for the first time – it's natural to need to talk it through."*

Short-termism and funding

The UK public sector is increasingly committed to getting public input on public services, for example in health, education, housing and social services. Yet such practices as engagement boards, or project board representation, are still unusual within UK museums and galleries, and they are in danger of being left behind.

During the study it became clear that, in terms of public engagement practice, the system of short-term project funding that supports museums and galleries actively discourages reflection, serving to perpetuate an illusion that the work is more effective than it is. The imperative to attract further funding contributes to a fear of reflection and a perceived 'insecurity' of organisations and their senior management in opening up discussion of the work.

A staff member of one of the larger museums offered this view: "There's a feeling of it all being quite fragile when we present ourselves publicly. But we can't have these discussions internally, because it's seen as 'negative'." This study's methodology attempts to cut through the overriding pressure to represent work in a purely positive light, focusing instead on long-term fundamental assumptions and the reality of participants' experience.

Project findings: the practice of engagement

Empowerment-lite

Across the 12 organisations, there was a growing feeling of frustration, mainly (but not solely) articulated by the community partners, that engagement in these museums and galleries did not always 'do what it said on the tin'. At an individual project and organisational level, the actual experience of engagement and participation frequently revealed a level of control, risk-aversion and 'management' by the organisations that served to undermine its impact and value for the 'target' participants.

Challenge to the organisation's plans was typically averted or subtly discouraged. Thus, while an illusion of creative participation is on offer in such situations, decisions tend to be coerced, or rushed through on the basis of the organisation's agenda or strategic plan, manipulating a group consensus of what is inevitable, usual or expected. In these cases, the experience described by the community partners is frustratingly what international development theorist Andrea Cornwall in another context calls 'empowerment-lite', with the concerns, complexities and 'messiness' of their everyday lives, their realities, filtered out.[6]

False consensus

Community partners noted that the organisations tended to reward those whose behaviour was less challenging and more in keeping with the organisation's priorities, placing them at the head of the queue and so reinforcing what Gaventa calls a "false consensus" among those willing to concede to the museum's goals. In this way, the organisations succeeded in exercising *consensual* power, convincing the participants that their interests are the same as those of the institution.[7] Conflict and any form of difference in opinion – central to democratic dialogue – are effectively avoided. The institution thus maintains order and control, but through an institutional culture in which the values of the institution subtly become the 'common-sense' values of all.

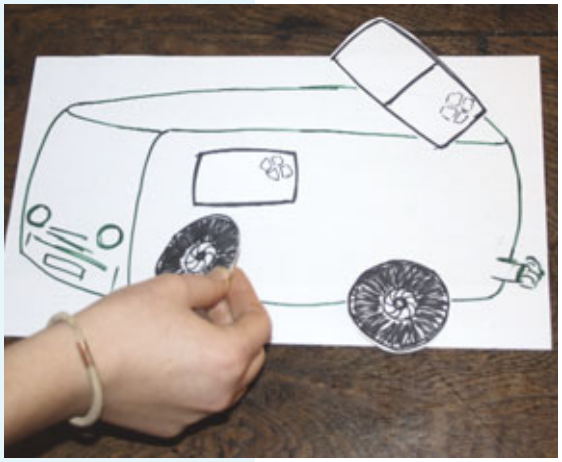
The following scene enacted at one of the larger museums in the study and depicted by staff and community partners is based on a real experience. It exemplified a recurring frustration that well-meaning museum and gallery staff continued to remain unaware of the subtle effects of institutional power in the form of coercion and 'false consensus':

[6] A. Cornwall, *Democratising Engagement: What the UK Can Learn from International Experience*, London: Demos 2008. www.demos.co.uk/publications/democratisingengagement.

[7] J. Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley,* Illinois: University of Illinois Press 1980, p.3.

A staff member emphatically 'briefs' a community partner on a vision for a major new display project, metaphorically portrayed as a basic drawing of a bus, without windows or wheels.

The community partner is given the task to 'consult' with the partner's community group for 'input', so as to 'co-produce' the big project with the museum. With little obvious enthusiasm, the community partner does so, and it is received by the group in turn without much enthusiasm. However, they dutifully produce a series of drawings, which are then brought back by the community partner to the museum staff member. The staff member looks through the drawings with mounting anxiety – disposing of those that don't fit her 'vision' for the exhibition. Finally, with relief, she finds a couple that will fit, and duly attaches these images – her wheels and windows – to the picture of her vehicle. She has known, all along, where her vehicle is heading.



The aftermath of such 'co-productions' frequently left community partners with the unhappy feeling of having colluded in their own marginalisation, disempowerment and even exclusion – an experience they rarely chose to repeat. As one community partner put it: "I perceive some consultation as being cosmetic. The museums have to have public consultation, but are they taking everything on board? I think not."

Local issue-based collaborative work

If brave enough, museums and galleries can use the production of exhibitions as a means to engage people right at the heart of the organisation, in terms of all elements of research, design, writing, storytelling, presentation and programming. Hackney Museum's *Platform* exhibitions are based on local issues and co-produced with local people, while Glasgow's Open Museum facilitates broad access to collections for use in the development of exhibitions based on community ideas and concerns, situated within community locations and co-produced by local people.

Rubber-stamping

For most of the organisations, engagement is 'contained' at the level of 'consultation' rather than 'collaboration', and even consultation is not always what it seems. In another scene at a museum in a different part of the country, a community partner similarly described the museum's community consultation practice:

The community partner takes the role of the museum director, who is portrayed in London at a high-powered meeting, hearing about the 'next big thing'. He comes back and briefs a member of staff on a major new project the museum will now be embarking upon.

The staff member asks: "Shouldn't we be consulting our community partners?" The Director says: "Good idea! Please organise it." Next the member of staff is seen telling a community partner about the project. The community partner is just at that moment asking about what's in it for the community, when the Director runs in saying: "Sorry, held up at a meeting. So pleased you are on board for this important initiative." The community member starts to protest: "But I hardly know a thing about it!" when he is interrupted by the Director who says: "Sorry, have to fly – another meeting – you know how it is. Can't tell you how much we appreciate your collaboration."

A number of similar examples in the study showed that when museums use public participation simply as a means to rubber-stamp existing plans, they are in danger of not only disillusioning participants but robbing people of their active agency as citizens, and preventing them from realising their capabilities. A community partner noted: "I think people would like to be more involved in the actual processes – they don't always feel that their ideas are listened to."

In contrast, Hackney Museum's *Platform* exhibitions put Hackney people and their issues of concern at the centre and see the museum's role as supporting them through collaboratively producing exhibitions: "I don't feel happy putting on an exhibition that has nothing to do with the people of Hackney. The idea comes from communities – they approach us and we collaborate on it," one Hackney Museum staff member said. "We need to be a museum that's relevant to people..."

Collaboration and recruitment

During the development of projects and exhibitions, consultation and collaboration might open new opportunities for participation. At Hackney Museum, an examination of the process prompted new recruitment from within the community.

"When we chaired the meetings, it just didn't work," said one staff member. *"Then we employed a well known and respected local artist, activist and facilitator to chair. He knew what we were doing and has enormous understanding of where people are coming from."*

This need for an external chair has prompted further recruitment of community members to work on the museum's behalf, including people working as 'facilitators' in this more intellectual sense.

Community partners as passive beneficiaries

For most community partners in the study, however, the reality of being on the receiving end of a museum's or gallery's distribution of resources left them feeling as if they had little voice and no control. This raised a further discussion that questioned the active agency of the participant within the 'invited space' of the museum or gallery.[8] Who decides which resources are to be shared? How are such decisions arrived at?

The workshop participants have been set the challenge of creating an image of the current relationship between the gallery and its local communities. One community participant – the leader of a local group involved in training opportunities for the young unemployed – walks over to a side table and grabs a plate of sliced cake.

Handing the plate of cake to a senior manager of the gallery, the community participant proceeds to arrange the mixed group of workshop participants (gallery staff and their community partners), asking them to stand in positions so that the staff members are grouped around the senior manager, all holding the plate of cake. The staff members are thus seen to be offering the cake. He then has the community participants form an orderly queue, awaiting their turn to receive their allotted piece.

This young man had eloquently demonstrated, without words, what it felt like to be a 'participant' or community 'partner' of this gallery. For him, the utopian rhetoric of mutuality and shared authority that ran throughout the gallery's policy documents and funding reports, placed, in reality, the community member in the role of 'supplicant' or 'beneficiary'. Following decades of UK government investment in public engagement in museums and galleries, he had wordlessly described what it can feel like to be on the receiving end. Afterwards, someone asked: "whose cake is it anyway?"

[8] N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. C. Calhoun, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1992, pp. 109–142.

Invisible power in the museum as 'invited space'

It became evident in discussions with staff members that there is little understanding of how power influences the development and delivery of this complex work.[9] The more overt use of institutional power includes decision-making and agenda-setting that clearly influence outcomes through inducement and persuasion based on the institution's authority. But, as the study found, power also acts in invisible ways on those upon whom the practice is based, as well as on those charged with its delivery.

"I'm here to help you"

The study was frequently forced to return to the purpose of the work for each of the organisations involved. The best indication of purpose and of how these relations are configured was to be found in the language of the policy documents on engagement and participation from the 12 museums and galleries within the study.

Consider the following words taken from an analysis of one museum's policy document (since revised). These words are typical of a variety of organisational documents in the study (and within the sector as a whole), including vision, mission statements and engagement strategies:

- we believe
- we have a responsibility
- we have a strong sense
- we can make people's lives better
- [we are] generators of well-being
- we play a leading role
- [we] increase racial tolerance
- we nurture a sense of belonging, cohesion, identity and pride

And we:

- provide
- develop
- expand
- foster
- ensure
- target
- encourage

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[9] The seminal work of political and social theorist Steven Lukes outlines the visible and invisible ways that institutions such as museums exercise their power. In *Power: A Radical View,* London: Macmillan Press 1974, Lukes describes the dimensions of power in the following way:

- Ability to get its way despite opposition or resistance
- Ability to keep issues off the political agenda in the first place
- The shaping of the public domain through beliefs, values and wants that are considered normal or acceptable.

- promote
- pursue
- enhance
- articulate
- tell

One can acknowledge that the ambition here is genuinely to be of service, to help those in need. The organisation's self-image in relation to its partners can come across in such terminology not only as patronising, but continuing to undervalue the potential breadth of knowledge of its community partners. It invites – and often receives – the response from community partners that they are better able to think and act for themselves than they are being given credit or scope for.

The meaning behind words can be very subtle. In the language of the policy document quoted above, the museum reveals a centre/periphery view of its communities, in which the organisation is firmly placed in the centre. Despite its undoubted wish to be of service, it displays an almost nineteenth-century view of a passive subject, outside the institution, awaiting improvement. The rhetoric of service within the policy documents of the organisations in the study too often places the subject (community member) in the role of 'supplicant' or 'beneficiary' and the museum and its staff in the role of 'carer'.

Understanding the words we use

Sometimes an examination and revaluation of language can invigorate discourse around engagement. At the Museum of East Anglian Life, staff members examined the words they used to discuss participation, and saw these 'terms of engagement' as a continuum.

The language used includes: engagement – *"inviting people to make a connection with us and our activities"*; participation – *"enabling people to take part"* and form that connection they're invited to make; and co-production – *"enabling individuals or groups to shape or modify an activity so that it becomes a different thing".*

Museum staff describe the process as one that's *"fluid"* and *"organic"*, in which the organisation *"lets go and lets fly"*.

Words matter – this was made abundantly clear once people involved in the study were given the chance to examine them. It was necessary to re-examine the assumptions within the wording of the policy statements, to see how the museums and galleries in the study explained the work to themselves. It is important to make such policies, and the processes by which they are arrived at, transparent, so that others can help museums interrogate them and, ideally, reconstruct them collaboratively. In this way, the implications of such wording may be more clearly understood and match the intended purpose of participation. Such an interrogation inevitably leads to the question: what is the purpose of this work, and how central is it to the museum's goals?

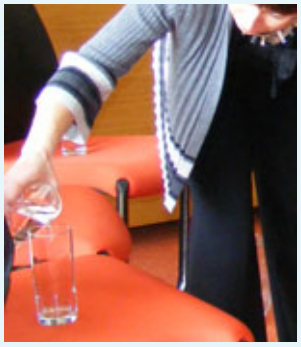
As one museum staff member noted: “People confuse consultation and collaboration...It’s a different power relationship.” The point demonstrated within the discussions is that the 12 museums and galleries needed to mind their language, or at least understand the terms they used, and consequently the promises and claims made, and make sure that they are appropriate to what the organisation is truly prepared or able to offer.

Who really matters? What is core and what is peripheral in the museum’s work?

The centre/periphery relationship between the museum or gallery and its communities was clearly exemplified by a scene created by one of the organisations:

A senior manager is given the task of describing the museum’s present relationship with its local communities. She gathers her staff into a circle, presenting each with an empty water glass she took from a side table.

The senior manager then takes the full water jug and pours water (resources) into each glass.
There is very little left over.



She then approaches a group of empty chairs, which represents the public who are not present. Having placed an empty glass on one of these chairs, she drains the very small amount of water that remained in her jug into this glass. This represented the little left over for ‘the public’, she explains.

The manager had clearly demonstrated that in order to get more water to give to the ‘public’, she would have to go back to one of the curators and take water from his or her glass. This was presented by the manager as an unsolvable dilemma – simply not enough money to support community engagement programmes if the organisation is also trying to support its ‘core’ work. Thus the notion of ‘core’ did *not* include the museum’s communities.

Need for visionary leadership

The dependency on project funding obscures and, in the long term, avoids the lack of a sustainable, strategic plan for engagement work, which in turn hides a serious lack of vision – the kind of vision required to develop the long-term partnerships noted above. As one staff member put it: “If it’s not believed at the top as a core value, it will not work.”

According to many staff members in the study, there remain, internally and externally, unexamined assumptions and differences in points of view regarding the purpose, use and success of the institution’s engagement practices. The need for leadership that places public engagement at the core

of a museum's or gallery's values was frequently expressed by participants in the study as a prerequisite for effective public engagement. A clear direction for the work was often assumed – but when examined, was frequently very unclear. Ensuring that engagement is brought into the centre of the organisation and that all are involved in the development of a strategic plan so that there is consistency of commitment, purpose and direction was noted as essential. Too often staff members reported on an inability to make decisions on projects and a lack of guidance on how to say yes and how to say no. Consistency in supporting the organisation's engagement work was raised as an ongoing issue within some of the organisations.

Yet, many noted that leadership is caught in a trap of opportunism and advocacy, with rhetoric disconnected from the reality of staff and community partners' experience. In one-to-one interviews with senior management, there was frequently a lack of awareness of what was happening on the ground, and a lack of self-reflection, partly because of the pace needed to constantly keep up, and come up, with new programmes for funding agendas as opposed to staff capacity and real local needs. Clear, value-led leadership committed to engagement and participation became a prerequisite expressed by the majority of participants in the study.

Breaking the funding merry-go-round

It became clear that, by encouraging museums continually to access short-term project funding for public engagement, there had been a shared failure in effectively addressing the public role of the museum as a whole. Yet it was clear from the study that, rather than finally tackling this, there is a growing danger that some of the museums and galleries in the study (large and small) will simply rush headlong to find alternatives to Renaissance and other national sources of project funding. As one staff member noted, echoing many others: "The area where we fall down is legacy and long-term. We work intensively with groups and move on. That's the issue with project funding – you move on to the next thing."

For many of the museums and galleries, the dependency on project funding has left them scrambling for new sources of income, with ideas currently under development for replacement project funding. In danger of simply replicating the cycle of project funding, some of the museums and galleries in the study have already seized upon opportunities such as Service Level Agreements with local authorities to deliver health and social services. These organisations must be mindful that while attempting to reinvent themselves through these new types of partnerships (social enterprises or statutory service agreements), they may find themselves bidding against third sector organisations for the same local authority budgets, and moving from possible partners to possible adversaries. They may also simply replicate the old problem of short-term project funding and its unsustainable impact, this time from a new source.

However, the current lack of project funding could present a genuinely new opportunity to negotiate new equitable partnerships with other social agencies – negotiated from the ground up. This would necessitate the museum or gallery identifying what it uniquely has to offer the partnership in terms of resources and skills development.

Long-term strategic partnerships

For many museums, an extended relationship with particular groups created a very real manifestation of participation. *"Lots of people want to work with offenders, but with many it's all lip-service,"* said one partner of Open Museums in their Scottish Prison Service work. *"Many see it as getting 'brownie points'. Open Museum is so different – they are really committed."*

In a similar approach, the Ryedale Folk Museum in Yorkshire works closely with the probationary service around the notion of offering real opportunities for shared work. At the Museum of East Anglian Life, a mental health partnership has seen 'Social Enterprise' volunteers running agricultural and horticultural work, making decisions, and maintaining, developing and producing products for sale as part of a long-term rural enterprise development plan.

Restricted resources offer new opportunities for local partnerships

The study saw excellent examples of how the present funding crisis can be an opportunity for museums and galleries to refocus on their locality, and the contribution that these museums and galleries – with their community partners – can make in helping to increase people's capabilities within their local area.

For some in the study, increasing people's capabilities has always been the central point of their work – being useful and being used by their community partners. They say: "We are not social workers – our skill is in skilling people in using us". With up-to-date and reliable local intelligence and working collaboratively within its locality, a well-informed, strongly networked museum or gallery becomes a "space for creating citizenship, where in learning to participate, citizens can cut their teeth and acquire new skills that can be transferred to other spheres – whether those of formal politics or neighbourhood action", as Cornwall puts it.[10]

As the influential Nobel prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, argues, such "active agency" must include the "capabilities for functioning" that enable people to exercise effective freedoms to choose and do what they value or have reason to value.[11] This would require museums and galleries such as those in the study to work with their local partners to re-examine the opportunities for people to make free choices, the organisation loosening its grip, sharing authority, and being open to challenge – and above all offering real opportunities for shared opinions and shared work.

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[10] A. Cornwall and V.S.P. Coelho (eds), *Spaces for Change? The politics of citizen participation in new democratic arenas,* London: Zed 2007, p.8. The quotation is in the context of civil society institutions as part of international development, but it is argued here that the point can be equally applied to museums and galleries and local development.

[11] Amartya Sen, Annual DEMOS Lecture, 2010.

Conclusions

Active partnerships versus empowerment-lite?

The study was entered into with the intention of taking the temperature of engagement and participation in a cross-section of the UK's museums and galleries, in 12 organisations, all of which are committed to public engagement. Through a process of active participation (reflection, discussion, debate) by the staff and community partners of these organisations, the fault-lines of engagement in even the most committed museums and galleries were collaboratively uncovered. It was found that, despite examples of very good working practice, real engagement that goes beyond 'empowerment-lite' faces hitherto unseen obstacles that inevitably result in the dissatisfaction of both staff members and community partners.

The study clearly demonstrated that "having a seat at the table is a necessary but not sufficient condition for exercising voice. Nor is presence at the table (on the part of institutions) the same as a willingness to listen and respond".[12] It is therefore unsurprising that offers by museums and galleries of what amounted to 'empowerment-lite' too often led to dissatisfaction in the relationships with their community partners.

The fault-lines within the museum's or gallery's organisational culture were consistently revealed by the process of this study as barriers to proper involvement. Despite best efforts to the contrary, these invisible barriers continue to create and recreate the mechanisms of marginalisation. They include attitudes that, in a number of cases, influenced the following:

- False consensus and inadvertently using people to 'rubber-stamp' organisational plans
- Policies and practices based on 'helping-out' and 'doing-for'
- Community partners treated as 'beneficiaries' rather than 'active agents'
- Project funding leading to non-mainstreaming of participation and pretending things are better than they are
- Absence of strong, committed leadership and a strategic plan for engagement

These are very real barriers, but they are surmountable. As the study has shown, through a collaborative process of courageous reflection with community partners, things can be brought to light and begin to change.

Strongest work

The strongest work that emerged from this study came from those organisations that had shifted the role of their community partners from beneficiaries (or supplicants) to active agents and partners of the museum.

[12] A. Cornwall, *Democratising Engagement: What the UK Can Learn from International Experience*, London: Demos 2008, p.13.

They had transformed their role into one of supporting people in developing their own capabilities. These museums and galleries had realised their capability in helping others to realise theirs. At the same time, they gained from the reciprocal capability of others in helping them reflect on their public engagement role.

The best examples of embedded and effective community engagement came from those organisations that, while sharing similar ideals, were pragmatic in their approach and thoroughly embedded in their particular locality. They think – and talk to each other and their partners, constantly – about what they do. Furthermore, they are unafraid to be self-critical, to take risks and therefore continually to develop their practice.

Tackling lack of openness in the sector

One community member noted: "You – your organisation – need us more than we need you." It became abundantly clear in this study that this was indeed true – that museums and galleries need their community partners in a way not always credited, perhaps as the *only* way these museums and galleries can take a clear look at their own practices, through the lens – the perceptions and the active input – of their service users and community partners.

The opportunity the study provided to reflect collectively in an open way on practice was surprisingly unusual. This in itself became the most important outcome of the study. It became clear that lack of discussion was a significant – perhaps *the* significant – cause of the frequent disillusionment surrounding current museum engagement practices. This lack of open discussion, the inability to address issues head on, contributed to the anger and frustration, the feeling of 'being stuck', which was so often expressed by community partners and staff alike.

Following the end of the research programme, therefore, Paul Hamlyn Foundation facilitated 'surgeries' by Dr. Bernadette Lynch with each of the participating organisations and their community partners to address the barriers to full participation and empowerment brought to light by the study, and to help maintain this collaborative way of working.

Next steps: clusters of empowering practice

Organisations are now building on these new insights and guidance to determine how they might change to bring communities effectively into the heart of all their work. Following upon the study's recommendation for matchmaking, some of the organisations are already reviewing policy and practice, and forming 'cluster' groups to pursue new ideas for co-developing practice.

- Set in motion by the study, Belfast Exposed is building on the organisation's concept of the gallery as an 'exchange mechanism'. In this way, they are further developing their space as a 'civic forum'. The purpose is to set up an ongoing exchange between the gallery and the city's diverse communities. Lack of civic space is a major issue for Northern Ireland, and the museum wants to contribute to the establishment of civic space within the city of Belfast. They are doing this by slowing down on the demands of

other programming (exhibitions) so as to create time and space for dialogue and debate, bringing together people and partners currently working with them at events which open up opportunities to cross networks and share experiences. Meanwhile they are meeting with other organisations within the Paul Hamlyn Foundation study.

- Glasgow's Open Museum staff began travelling in 2011 to extend the conversation and see other practice ("expanding what's possible!"). They have met with Ryedale Folk Museum and have been to Hackney Museum and Belfast Exposed. They say: "We're all keen to take advantage of this opportunity to support and learn from each other's experiences."
- Wolverhampton Arts and Heritage Service and the Lightbox Museum and Art Gallery have been meeting with the Museum of East Anglian Life to work on developing ideas for social enterprise.
- Ryedale Folk Museum's Director, Mike Benson, has been busy travelling to Glasgow, London and Belfast, meeting colleagues from the study but also making links with their community partners, to link communities. At the moment, Ryedale is pursuing twinning links between young people in Yorkshire and Belfast.

Next steps: funders investing in organisational change instead of projects

The research carried out by Dr. Bernadette Lynch, and the subsequent workshops and surgeries, demonstrate that there is a role for funding bodies to support organisational change instead of projects, finding ways to help museums and galleries help themselves to connect with local communities through brokering mutually beneficial relationships. For example, by investing in organisational development and change through a 'critical friends' co-developed process, future funding can help museums and galleries to:

- Renegotiate or reaffirm their relationship with, and role within, civil society
- Understand their locality – the *place* in which they are located
- Broker creative, strategic partnerships and alliances in their local area

In developing engagement and participation in this way, museums and galleries should build an ongoing reflective practice, which will be an integral part of the collaborative process of effective change.

Appendix 1. Background to the report

Paul Hamlyn Foundation identified the museums and galleries sector as a possible focus for intervention in 2008, with research on how community engagement and participation could effectively permeate whole organisations.

Under the guidance of Kate Brindley, Director of the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art and Advisor to the Arts Programme Committee, the Foundation commissioned market research company LUCID to manage a consultation process to identify what kinds of participation already existed and to recommend potential action and support. This involved 20 one-to-one interviews with key individuals as well as three participatory regional workshops (in Liverpool, Bristol and London) attended by 58 museum professionals and community members/participants. In December 2008, LUCID presented a report that mapped the kinds of participation existing and made a number of recommendations, in particular to commission a study of participative structures and processes, acknowledging that little was yet known about how to create a successful participative organisation.

In January 2009, PHF hosted a round-table discussion for senior figures from the museums and galleries sector to test LUCID's findings and recommendations and see how to take them forward. As a result of the meeting, in March 2009 PHF put out a call for tender and commissioned Dr. Bernadette Lynch to develop case studies to help understanding of what good engagement practice looked like and what impact it might have in terms of public benefit. The Foundation identified about 40 organisations with reputations for community engagement and participation, but selected a manageable study group of 12, ensuring there was a good mix of geographical location across the UK, size of institution, nature of collections and type of governance.

Because Dr. Lynch succeeded in building a great deal of trust from both the museums' and galleries' staff and the community members involved, it was agreed not to use the information emerging from her research to create case studies, as originally intended, but to extract key themes from the material she was gathering. She presented her final report to the Arts Programme Committee in July 2010; this report was also discussed on a one-to-one basis with each participating organisation and through two workshops, in London and Manchester, which brought the organisations together to share their experiences. The report published here is a summary of the findings in that longer report. The learning from the research also provided the basis for a session on participation led by Dr. Lynch at the 2010 Museums Association conference in Manchester. Between November 2010 and March 2011, Dr. Lynch led a series of ‘surgeries’ with each of the museums and galleries in the study group, reflecting on the results of the research and looking at potential changes in organisational structure, partnerships, and ways of working.

The PHF trustees have asked the Arts Programme Committee to develop an intervention that would build on the knowledge gathered through this careful research process since 2008, potentially to facilitate a process of development and organisational change within museums and galleries that are committed to active partnership with their communities. In January 2011, Dr. Piotr Bienkowski was appointed as Project Director for six months to develop a proposal that the trustees will be asked to approve in July 2011.

Appendix 2. Methodology

Taking museums and galleries on a reflective journey[13]

It was important to find a way to make it easy for those involved (museum staff and community partners) to discuss the issues themselves, and to ensure that the discussions helped people to form their own opinions. The primary focus of the process was therefore one of open reflection, creating the space for those participating with museums and galleries to reflect, discuss, step back and help analyse the work.[14]

All the organisations in the study were introduced to Augusto Boal's use of participatory drama. As seen in the *image* and *forum theatre* scenes described earlier, they were encouraged to develop and act out scenes in order to describe the present situation in terms of their engagement practices. Boal's concepts of participatory drama and techniques of organisational learning and reflection are based, he says, on "understanding, knowing by experience and experimenting, expanding my capacity to recognise, to apprehend and to learn".[15]

Participatory workshops

A participatory workshop was held at each of the 12 organisations with their staff and community partners. Time was spent in the workshops discussing levels or degrees of possible engagement, ranging from informing the public and consulting with them for their views, right through to fully collaborating and co-producing a project. Staff and community partners were encouraged to use dialogue and movement to fully reenact an actual situation so that all present could subsequently analyse, in the scene presented, the level and impact of 'active engagement' on offer from the museum or gallery.

Lively discussions of how it feels to be in someone else's position made further exploration of complex, unspoken, social relations possible, within the dynamics of engagement between the museum or gallery and their communities. These discussions frequently uncovered differing assumptions between staff members.

[13] The methods described below have been created or adapted for use in museum and gallery organisational development by Dr. Bernadette Lynch, and are the copyright of her company, Change Management and Associates. Contact lynchbernadette@hotmail.com.

[14] The study was underpinned by the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). The PAR approach ensures that the views of communities and the museum/gallery sector are integral to the process.

[15] A. Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, London: Routledge 2006, p. 29. Also A. Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, London: Pluto Press 1979.

A range of such participatory methods was used and proved extremely helpful in unearthing assumptions and projections, and getting closer to how colleagues and community partners actually think and feel about the work. They included the following:

- A co-developed organisational questionnaire (one per organisation) was prepared and completed with questions suggested by the participants. Completed by all involved in advance of each workshop visit, these helped to examine where things stand now with regards to engagement and participation. It was requested that the questionnaire be completed by the research team in each organisation.
- Review of policy documents and organisational charts. A process of discourse analysis was used in order to identify stated aims that could be measured against actual practice, finding the gaps to explore in the workshops in terms of values, aims and objectives, where the work sat in the organisational structure, how the organisation classified the work, and the organisation's understanding of the terminology used.
- Following each of the exercises, all participants were strongly encouraged to add comments to the 'storywall'. These were added to the project's online blog which captured the views of each organisation for inclusion in the project website: http://heartofengagement.wordpress.com/
- One-to-one interviews were a central part of the process. Participants' views emerged from the workshops, while others 'germinated', so that when the community partners, staff members and volunteers were interviewed privately, on a one-to-one basis, they had had time to develop their thoughts. The views expressed openly in the workshops were often the most powerfully revealing, as they openly challenged people's assumptions, but the one-to-one interviews also gave people the chance to speak anonymously. As with all the activities, the interviews included senior management.
- Regional 'Dragons' Dens': At the final regional 'knowledge exchange' meetings the organisations came together. They presented their ways of working and were put through a 'Dragon's Den' process, with staff and community partners from the other organisations invited to act as 'critical friends'. In the 'den' (three empty chairs, representing 'funders', 'public' and 'staff'), the process involved an agreed representative from each organisation delivering a brief presentation on their organisation's goals and methods in relation to engagement and participation. The other participants devised comments, challenges and questions from the point of view of one of the 'dragons'. The exercise powerfully presented a model of organisations and community partners acting as 'critical friends' in relation to each other's work.

Appendix 3. Organisational contacts

1. Belfast Exposed: Pauline Hadaway
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4. Glasgow Open Museum: Chris Jamieson
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5. Hackney Museum: Jane Sarre
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6. Lightbox, Woking, Surrey: Marilyn Scott
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7. Museum of London: Fiona Davison
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10. Ryedale Folk Museum: Mike Benson
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11. Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums: Hazel Edwards
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12. Wolverhampton Arts and Heritage Service: Angela Tombs
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Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Paul Hamlyn (1926–2001) was an entrepreneur, publisher and philanthropist committed to providing new opportunities and experiences for people regardless of their background. His overriding concern was to open up the arts and education to everyone, but particularly to young people. In 1987 he set up the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for general charitable purposes, and on his death he bequeathed the majority of his estate to the Foundation, making it one of the UK's largest independent grant-making organisations.

Paul Hamlyn Foundation works across the UK through three programmes – Arts, Education and Learning, and Social Justice. Each comprises an Open Grants scheme, to which organisations can apply with proposals for funding innovative activities, and Special Initiatives, which are more focused interventions that aim to have deeper impact on a particular issue. The Foundation also has a programme of support for NGOs in India.

The mission of the Foundation is to maximise opportunities for individuals to realise their potential and to experience and enjoy a better quality of life, now and in the future. In particular, the Foundation is concerned with children and young people and with disadvantaged people.

Arts programme

The Arts programme supports the development and dissemination of new ideas to increase people's experience, enjoyment and involvement in the arts, with a particular focus on young people. The Open Grants scheme supports organisations and groups, concentrating on work that is transformational at three levels: for the participants, for the funded organisations themselves and, more generally, for the sector in which they operate. Grants are also awarded through three Arts programme Special Initiatives – ArtWorks: Developing Practice in Participatory Settings, Awards for Artists, and the Breakthrough Fund.

For information about the Arts programme or any other aspect of Paul Hamlyn Foundation's work, please visit www.phf.org.uk

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