

## Case Study

<b>Title:</b>	<b>The Museum of...Project: An interdisciplinary collaboration in the development and visualisation of a new museum concept</b>
<b>Keywords:</b>	Museums; theory/creative practice; teamwork; project management, interdisciplinarity.
<b>Abstract:</b>	This case study focuses on a design-led integrated project involving first year undergraduates from ten different courses in the School of Creative Enterprise at the London College of Communication. In 2008 approximately 350 students worked together in 24 mixed groups to develop a new concept for a museum. The project culminated in 'The Museum of.... Trade Fair', an event where the groups displayed their museum proposals and sold their ideas to a panel of judges from the museum sector. The project gave students the opportunity to work with colleagues from other disciplines and to combine theory with creative practice.

### Context and rationale:

Prior to September 2008, the undergraduate level courses in the School of Creative Enterprise at the London College of Communication included interior design, marketing and advertising, creative advertising strategy, public relations, international travel and tourism communications and retail management. A summer term cross-course, school-wide 'Integrated Project' was introduced to maximise the potential of the diversity of subject areas covered and to unite the school in an activity that would showcase its creativity and versatility. The 'Integrated Project' was scheduled to take place in the final term for all first year students and provide a stimulating learning opportunity culminating in a special event.

The aims of the project were to provide students with an opportunity to work with colleagues from other disciplines across the school; to apply learning from their specialist area to the project brief; and to combine theoretical engagement with creative practice. Students would develop skills in research, project management, team work, problem-solving, communication, presentation and reflection. In addition they would be able to identify and set in context the key concepts and theories relevant to the theme of the project.

It was agreed that the 'Integrated Project' topic should change annually but it had to be relevant to the creative industries and build on the examination of culture and context introduced in the first year core cultural studies units. The subject of museums was chosen because it was an area in which staff had useful contacts, relevant expertise and research interests. For example, lecturers had been involved in organising events for the National Maritime Museum, carrying out audience studies for Tate and the Dulwich Picture Gallery, researching into museum shops and the role of contemporary cultural institutions. It was a topic that had relevance for all courses within the school's portfolio and had the potential for interesting site visits.

Approximately three hundred and fifty students from ten different courses worked together in twenty-four mixed groups. The average age range of the students was eighteen to twenty years with a significant percentage coming from ethnic minority backgrounds. What we found surprising was that in spite of an increase in the number of museums since the 1980s and a rise in visitor numbers, many of our own students had never visited a museum. The project provided an opportunity for students to consider museums from a range of perspectives and to appreciate that today museums are no longer defined simply by their collections but have

expanded their role to fulfil a multiplicity of functions.

### **Description of activity:**

The title of the project was inspired by a regular feature in the *Museums Journal* called 'The Museum of...' which highlights specialist collections in the UK. Each group was set the task of devising, visualising and selling a concept for a museum. The project was logistically complex due to the number of staff and students involved and necessitated painstaking planning and careful coordination. The timescale covered a period of eight weeks with the first two weeks taken up by lectures, the following five weeks with group meetings and seminar activities and the final week with an event. Each group was allocated a consultant, a member of staff whose responsibility it was to observe meetings, to advise and monitor progress and ensure that the required outcomes were delivered by the specified deadlines. A detailed handbook was produced covering project aims and outcomes, operations, group membership, information about participating staff and assignment requirements. Ongoing communication with students and lecturers was achieved through the use of Blackboard, an interactive website where information could be updated, topics discussed and announcements made.

Students were encouraged to think of the museum in its broadest sense by drawing on the information provided by guest speakers including curators, museum managers, museum journalists and archivists in addition to academic staff. Theoretical underpinning was provided by lectures which covered a broad range of museum-related topics. These included: the history of the institution, understanding museum audiences, local museums, curating fashion, archives, the museum of the everyday, interpretation, museum policy and funding, cultural ownership, museum journalism, exhibition design, marketing communications and public relations for museums and museum events. Taught sessions were augmented by recommended reading drawn from a range of disciplines including museology, art and design history, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology and marketing. In addition to reading around the subject, individual and group research involved visiting a range of museums and exhibitions.

Each group was limited to a table top on which to display their museum concept. Visualisation could take whatever form was considered most appropriate to communicate the group's ideas. For example this could be a model, graphic display, text, video or sound recording. The groups also had to produce a development diary recording the process of research and project development, minutes from meetings and museum visits; a thousand-word written rationale justifying the concept and relating it to relevant theory; and a photographic record of their table top display. Individually the students had to submit a five hundred word piece of written reflection outlining the challenges and learning outcomes of the project. The formal academic assessment of the task was carried out by marking teams and undertaken separately from the competition held at the event. In total thirty-four academic staff were involved in the project as consultants, lecturers or event helpers with many other administrative and support staff assisting and advising.

The project finale was the 'The Museum of...Trade Fair', an evening event and competition with wine and music where the groups came together to display their museum proposals and sell their ideas to a panel of judges from the museum sector. This was promoted as a formal occasion where students dressed up and socialised with staff, invited guests and museum representatives. It also marked the end of the first academic year so the students were in celebratory mode and the event had a party atmosphere. At the same time as the 'experts' were carrying out their assessment, a 'public' vote took place and the evening closed with a keynote speech by an invited museum director and the official presentation of a prize to the group with the winning concept.

### **Evaluation:**

Project evaluation was undertaken in a number of ways, both formal and informal. Written reflection by students provided feedback on individual contribution, group interaction and perceptions of the project and its success. From the twenty-four consultants we received weekly written updates on the progress of each group in terms of visits, research and project development. It was also possible to monitor how the theories and concepts introduced through the lecture series and weekly workshops fed into the project. This formal feedback contributed to the final grade for students. Each student achieved a mark for group work,

reflective writing and attendance and contribution.

Additional feedback on the project and the quality of the students' work was provided by the judges on the night of the event. They viewed the table top displays and conducted a short interview with representatives from each group before deciding on the prize winners. The academic assessment of the project was undertaken by lecturers who marked all submissions including the research and supporting work not presented at 'The Museum of...Trade Fair'. It is worth noting that the group who won the first prize at the event was not awarded the highest grade for their course work. Informally, we received a significant level of positive feedback, both written and verbal, on the project and event from students and staff. "Thank you for a fantastic event, we are very proud of what we have achieved" (student email 5/6/08).

#### **Evidence of how we achieved aims:**

The aims of the project were met in a number of different ways. The student groups were chosen to create as diverse a cohort as possible with at least one student from each course per group. An attempt was made to ensure the students were not friends from existing seminar groups in order to encourage new relationships, group coherence and interaction. The content of the project guaranteed that there were areas of study and application relevant to the creative industries and to each of the student courses. This was achieved through the varied topics covered by the lectures and the specific requirements of the assignment brief. The theoretical engagement and personal and professional development (PPD) skills referenced in the brief were emphasised in the lecture series and through the requirement to submit a group rationale for their museum and an individual piece of reflective writing.

The students' engagement with theory and creative practice was clearly demonstrated by the project outputs. The concept visualisation, research and development work provided evidence of the application of key theories and ideas introduced through lecture series into their practical work. The range of material including posters, models, videos and working websites created by the students in addition to their written museum rationales and reflective pieces was testament to the success of this theory/practice engagement.

#### **Challenges:**

A key issue for the project was group size, which averaged out at thirteen to fifteen students. There were some complaints about the difficulty of working with so many group members. Due to the size differential of each course it also meant that some groups had up to six members from the same discipline, with other courses having a single representative. This was not a problem in the main but in a couple of cases meant that there was an existing group within a group, which at times skewed working priorities. From a resource perspective twenty-four groups was the maximum number possible to manage. Ideally groups would have been smaller with equal representation from each course.

Other issues which arose during the project were poor attendance by some students and problems encountered in group work. These are concerns which are ongoing and not project-specific so it is unsurprising that they were mentioned by consultants and students alike. Some students had difficulties due to paid work or child care commitments and these absences interfered with group coherence and project progress. However to circumvent such problems enterprising groups organized themselves online using Facebook and held virtual group meetings to minimise disruptions from absenteeism. Difficulties relating to group work were resolved as the project progressed and students highlighted this area as one which they thought provided good preparation for future work situations where they would be required to operate as part of a team.

In terms of the sustainability of the concept, the model developed for 'The Museum of...Project' can be adjusted and reused for future activities. The outline framework of the project in relation to timetabling, document templates, assignment requirements and assessment criteria, staff biographies, and event details can be customised and used in subsequent activities. The challenges faced during 'The Museum of...Project' have been evaluated and recorded and can therefore be addressed in succeeding projects. In 2009, for example, the adaptability of this model was proven by its successful re-use in an 'Integrated Project' run by the School of Creative Enterprise called 'Engaging Places'.

## **Conclusion**

Overall 'The Museum of... project' was judged to be a success by students and staff. It helped to develop transferable skills such as verbal and written communication, time management, research, team working, and observational skills that would be useful for work and would complement the students' main course of study. It also encouraged students to actively participate in their learning, to challenge their preconceptions of museums and to critically engage with the museum as an institution. Through the development of their group concept, students actively participated in and took ownership of their learning in a process of self-discovery and reflection. Many of the students participating in this project were those who traditionally did not visit museums frequently, if at all. Our hope is that this project has changed their perceptions and that the students will continue to find their own meanings in museums and benefit from the enriching experiences that these encounters can bring. As one of the students commented, the project "allowed me to look at museums differently and changed my opinion of them and I developed a genuine interest for them".