**Emphasising mutual benefit: rethinking the impact agenda through the lens of Share Academy**

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Introduction

The early 21st century brought considerable changes to the way museums and universities were constituted and understood. Initiatives like the UK government funded Renaissance in the Regions programme encouraged museums to broaden their audiences and think of themselves as lifelong educators, situating learning at the centre of museum practice. However, ongoing funding problems within the museum sector continued to contribute to an erosion of curatorial skills as specialist roles were replaced with more general posts. At the same time, the university sector saw an increasing emphasis on the importance of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which wanted academics in the UK to share their work beyond the academy. In addition, the introduction and steady increase of student fees and the rapid expansion of the student body (Arnold-Foster and Speight, 2010) led universities to place a greater emphasis on student employability and ‘real world’ engagement.

Decreasing public subsidy has been an issue for both sectors, with teaching grants rescinded for all but science, technology, engineering and maths subjects and some of the social sciences in 2011, placing particular strains on arts, design and humanities departments. Museums have suffered similar problems, seeing a reduction in Renaissance funding, cuts to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, pressure on local government spending and increased competition for grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council England. These circumstances have encouraged museums and universities to think creatively about ways of delivering their core obligations of research, knowledge exchange and public engagement through collaborations with new partners. This chapter aims to explore how museum-university partnerships can be activated to form mutually beneficial, sustainable relationships through two case studies from the Share Academy initiative.

Share Academy

Share Academy, a partnership between University College London, University of the Arts London and the London Museums Group, was set up in 2012 in response to the emerging cultural and economic landscape. Share Academy was born of a belief that in a world where everyone was being asked to do more with reduced resources universities and museums had a lot to offer one another. Universities tend to have greater experience of managed risk taking, critical thinking and academic research where museums bring their incredible collections, subject specific knowledge and a superior understanding of how to take complex subject matter and render it in ways the general public can understand. The aim of Share Academy is to encourage collaborative partnerships between universities and small to medium sized museums; those who might not otherwise have the confidence or the resources to engage with higher education. Lannin et al (2014) identify the fact that ‘academics can be unaware of the potential held within small museums’ yet they have much to offer in terms of subject specialist knowledge, unique collections, community engagement and fleetness of foot. Share Academy has been funded by Arts Council England to explore the challenges and benefits of partnerships between museums and universities, broker new partnerships and evaluate ensuing activity.

Between October 2012 and April 2013, the first pilot project was funded through Arts Council England’s Strategic Fund for promoting excellence and raising standards within regional museums. The pilot delivered three exploratory case studies and a scoping study outlining the landscape and ecology of university/museum partnerships in the London region. Semi-structured interviews in the museum and higher education sectors identified the level of collaboration already taking place and the potential for further activity. The scoping study revealed that much good work was already happening, but that relationships tended to be ad-hoc and personal rather than strategic or institutionally embedded (Hannan and McNulty, 2013). Relationships also tended to be predictable (museum studies students doing work placements) rather than creative or interdisciplinary. The pilot project concluded that there was potential for further partnership working and room for improvement in the way partnerships were brokered and managed.

This was followed by Share Academy II (April 2013–March 2015), funded by a grant from Arts Council England’s Resilience Fund, which supports the provision of developmental opportunities across the museum sector. During the two year period of the grant Share Academy was able to broker and fund 15 partnership projects with grants of up to £10,000 with a view to exploring what works well in university/museum partnerships, what challenges arise and what constitutes best practice in partnership working. Meyer (2010) argues that in a knowledge economy we need to know how knowledge is made, translated or transacted across boundaries. The Share Academy team was able to offer support from experts in partnership working from both the museum and university sectors. While the brokerage element of Share Academy was cost intensive, it did lead to a number of new (in certain circumstances unlikely) partnerships. It also ensured that the partnerships supported common goals.

As part of the application process Share Academy ran a number of ‘sand pit’ events to give academics and potential museum partners an opportunity to meet face to face and discuss ways of working together. This was modelled on activities developed by The Cultural Capital Exchange, an organisation set up to promote the exchange of knowledge and expertise between higher education, business and the cultural and creative sectors in London. The sand pits proved highly successful with many of the funded projects meeting at the events. Unsurprisingly, given that Share Academy was encouraging collaborative practice between universities (large scale, business minded, self-confident, articulate) and small to medium sized museums (can-do, generous spirited organisations less used to fighting their corner), it was not unusual for the university partner to emerge from initial negotiations with the upper hand. Comunian and Gilmore (2015), who have explored how universities work with the creative economy, identify a need to acknowledge and address ‘power relationships in these collaborations’. Share Academy’s grant application and monitoring processes were designed to enhance the museums’ negotiating position and ensure that projects carried mutual benefit for both partners.

Funding was awarded through an open application process and the resulting projects were diverse in their range and scope from student-led projects to testing ideas or engendering debate. From the outset Share Academy anticipated that most of the projects brokered and funded would be around researchers looking for ways to prove public impact and public engagement outside the academy but it was left entirely to applicants to decide how projects would be constituted. Ultimately research impact proved to be a relatively small part of the portfolio of projects, many of which were a blend of teaching, learning and research outputs.

Case studies

Between 2012 and 2015 Share Academy funded 18 projects in total. The projects included testing of new digital technologies in gallery environments, research into how health and wellbeing can be improved by interaction with museum collections, the creation of new publications and exhibitions for museums, using oral histories to explore inspiration and using drawing as a way of understanding medical specimens. A series of universities collaborated with a wide range of museums including independent, local government funded and university museums. There is a long history of archaeology and museum studies courses working with museums so Share Academy deliberately encouraged more creative partnerships. Some of them included BA Jewellery Design and MA Fashion and the Environment (creating new material for exhibitions), MA Art and Science (exploring drawing as a way of understanding), MA Design (building new audiences), MA Publishing (designing and printing a book) and BA/MA English (contributing to a literary festival). In this section, two case studies are illustrated to give a more in depth view of what was achieved. They are the *Peckham Cultural Institute* and *Local Roots/Global Routes: the Legacies of British Slave-ownership*.

Peckham Cultural Institute

The Peckham Cultural Institute was a partnership between the South London Gallery, an international gallery whose mission is to ‘bring art to the people of south London’, and MA Culture, Criticism and Curation at Central Saint Martins, which offers students a unique framework for critically engaging with culture. The objective of the Peckham Cultural Institute was to create a counter offer to Google’s Cultural Institute, effectively challenging the notion that Google (or those who use the Google search engine) have the right define what might be considered culturally valuable.

Google’s mission is to ‘organise the world’s information and make it universally accessible’ and in recent years Google has come to wield enormous power, both as the world’s most used search engine and the instigator of highly successful projects such as Google Maps, Google Scholar and Street View. The Google Cultural Institute is based on a model developed by Google when it launched the Google Book Search project (later renamed Google Books) in 2004. The Google Book Search project initially aimed to digitise some 15 million books from the collections of Stanford University, the University of Michigan, the Weidener Library at Harvard and the New York Public Library. In 2007 Jean-Noël Jeanneney, then president of the Bibliothèque national de France, published a critique of the project. Jeanneney acknowledged the value of attempting to open up a centuries old treasure trove of knowledge, but was concerned that Google – an institute in which ‘the cultural impulse and the commercial impulse’ were at odds – should be the driving force behind the project. In his view, Google’s dominant motivation is to ensure revenue for shareholders rather than genuine cultural or public benefit. Jeanneney refused to accept that culture should be treated as ‘just another piece of merchandise’ where Google’s algorithms rank, index and order content in a ‘system in which success breeds success, at the expense of newcomers, minorities, marginal’ (Jeanneney, 2007).

While offering participation and access, the Google Cultural Institute could also be accused of representing culture in its narrowest and highest form. The Peckham Cultural Institute wanted to offer a critique of the Google Cultural Institute and represent a different and more democratic view of culture based on locality and community participation. From the start the project was built on democratic principles, being led by students from the MA Culture, Criticism and Curation course (who come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds) and members of South London Gallery’s REcreative Editorial Board. REcreative was launched by the South London Gallery in 2011 and has developed into an online community exploring contemporary art and design. REcreative is led by young people aged 16–25 and aims to connect young creatives to free cultural opportunities in London and further afield. The Editorial Board meets every month to discuss content for the REcreative website and contributes to the South London Gallery’s educational programme.

With the help of MA Culture, Criticism and Curation, the project partners were able to develop a good understanding of research methodologies and research processes. The partners agreed that they wanted their project to challenge Google’s perceived hegemony and articulate a counter argument to the ‘mechanistic point of view’ computers impose on their users (Lovink, 2011). The project started with an introductory meeting followed by four study sessions, each with a guest speaker including gallerists, a designer and cultural historian and representatives from Culture 24, Arts Council England and Google Cultural Institute. Each session went part way to challenging whether Googlers – or Google’s algorithms – should be left to decide what constitutes culture. The study sessions served to give the group time to gel, to think about the subject and discuss key issues within it. They also offered an opportunity for those leading the project to see how the group was thinking and to be reassured about the quality of the work.

Participants in the workshops debated key issues such as what happens to a work of art when it is posted online, how a digital curation project can involve local residents in a meaningful way, how to generate content that is genuinely reflective of counter-culture and how to reflect a ‘crowd-sourced’ version of culture back to Google. Ultimately the project culminated in a digital thinktank titled WYSIWYG? (What you see is what you get?) hosted in the South London Gallery’s Clore Studio in July 2014. Artists, curators and digital experts from the Victoria & Albert Museum, Barbican and Lighthouse were invited to discuss the impact of the digital world on art and culture in the 21st century. It was interesting (perhaps even ironic) that a project about digital curation and archiving which at first anticipated a digital output ultimately culminated in an event where real people debated the issues associated with digital curation in real time. This was, in part, a reflection of the difficulty in creating online resources that represent culture in its widest sense in any meaningful way. It is also a result of the fact that the project was allowed to develop in line with the thinking of the project participants rather than the host institution. While the project did produce a modest website, the real value of the project was in the face to face engagement with the local communities, which attended the event in considerable numbers.

In her work *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon (2010) describes the importance of co-creative or collaborative practice for cultural institutions in terms of giving local communities a voice. In seeking to present an alternative and more egalitarian or counter view of culture through the REcreative project, the South London Gallery brought its embeddedness with the local community and long standing relationships with a group of young people who could provide an alternative viewpoint. This is a good example of a university benefiting by linking into a gallery’s existing (and in this instance highly developed) public engagement processes. Simon (2010) also stresses the importance of creating a level playing field within collaborative or co-creative projects so the institution and project participants meet as equals. While the Peckham Cultural Institute had clear goals and structure, the project’s outcomes were not prescribed by either Central Saint Martins or the South London Gallery. The brief for the project was offered ‘in the spirit of study, debate, critique and participation’ and asked participants to spend six months creating an alternative model for representing culture through digital curating in response to Google’s offer to ‘host the world’s treasures online’. However, beyond that there was no expectation of what the outcome might look like.

It would be unrealistic to suggest that the Peckham Cultural Institute can launch a serious challenge to the international corporate hegemony of Google. However, on a local scale the project has given young creatives in south London a voice and a framework for challenging seemingly unassailable cultural narratives. Members of the ReCreative Editorial Board have expressed an interest in rolling the model of the Peckham Cultural Institute out to other areas of their work and are using the Facebook group from the panel debates to continue the discussion. The project has also had an impact on the MA in Culture, Criticism and Curation course at Central Saint Martins, as research and practice models have been integrated into the course alongside a newfound belief in the value of participatory enactments and community engagement. In a world where new cultural norms are emerging in response to digital technologies, it is important that young people are provided with the tools to remain independent of thought and develop frameworks for countering overarching narratives. By bringing together groups of young people and engaging them (and their local communities), the Peckham Cultural Institute engendered new ways of thinking and encouraged ongoing and meaningful participation in cultural debate.

Local Roots/Global Routes: the Legacies of Slavery in Hackney

The second case study is a partnership motivated by the desire to share research beyond the boundaries of the academy through the building of meaningful community relationships at a local level. The project’s focus was the impact of transatlantic slavery; something which has recently been brought to public consciousness through the marking of key anniversaries including (in 2007) the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slave trading in the British Empire. Exhibitions in the port cities of London, Liverpool and Bristol and the representation of slavery in films such as *Twelve Years a Slave* have gone some way to making enslavement a topic for mainstream discussion. However, Donington et al (2016) note that slavery is all too often considered a distant phenomenon and argue that because ‘British slavery happened, in large part, on the plantations of the Caribbean, geographic distance has enabled a distancing of the mind’. In reality the slavery business was much more far reaching than people assume. One of the key issues associated with narratives of slavery in the UK is the nation’s reluctance to engage in discussions about just how many British citizens (and British institutions) profited from slave-ownership or business activities associated with slavery.

The Legacies of British Slave-ownership project run by UCL is seeking to change that by focusing on the 3000 or so slave owners who lived in Britain when slavery was finally abolished in 1833. In 2013 the project launched the Encyclopedia of Slave-ownership, pulled from thousands of records detailing the compensation paid to slave owners when their slaves were emancipated. This searchable database shows that the exploitation of enslaved people had links uncomfortably close to home. Proactive users can visit the project’s website and search for the slave owners by name or geographical location. However, academics at UCL were keen to explore ways of sharing their research with those who might not know of the database or be motivated to make a search. With this in mind academics from UCL reached out to Hackney Museum and Archives to explore the possibility of working together on a programme of activities that would bring the Encyclopedia of Slave-ownership to life. Hackney was chosen as it is a diverse borough with a relatively large proportion of Black African, Black Caribbean and Black British residents compared to other London boroughs. The local museum has a strong track record in designing innovative projects to engage with local audiences. They have expertise in the delivery of educational activities for young people, working with creative practitioners on difficult historical subjects and (most importantly) the trust of their local community. Representatives from UCL and Hackney Museum and Archives attended one of the Share Academy sand pit events in the hope of working up some ideas about how they might work together.

At the outset of the project the partners were planning to work with a community consultant, a creative art practitioner and three secondary schools to produce an interactive educational resource for Key Stage 3. It was anticipated that the resource would have a performative element and would complement the Black History Season already offered by Hackney Museum and Archives for Key Stages 1 and 2. The proposed resource would address a number of issues including UCL’s ambition to engage with local communities around issues of enslavement, Hackney Museum and Archive’s continuing efforts to build meaningful and sustainable relationship with the public and a request from local school teachers for more resources addressing issues of race and identity. The project appointed a research intern who used information from the Legacies of British Slave-ownership database to trace Hackney’s links with transatlantic slavery. Through his research it was identified that least 11 local people and events had links with slavery. An education intern worked on the conceptual framework for the educational resource which was then tested with local schools. Additional funding was used to deliver workshops with Our Lady’s Convent High School and Hackney BSix College. Overall four teachers and 45 students participated and ultimately the project partners created a multi-media teaching pack with sufficient material for six lessons complemented by a film with expert interviews and discussion points linked to the content of the pack.

The Local Roots/Global Routes project grew considerably during the delivery timeframe. Additional funding was sought from Arts Council England’s Grants for the Arts programme, which enabled the partners to pay for two creative practitioners to work with young people to develop creative responses to the educational resources. The young people then presented their responses at ‘Putting the Black in the Union Jack?’, a conference about teaching Black history that took place in November 2015 and attracted an audience of 250. The event addressed the marginalisation of Black history in Britain and showcased some of the best of Black British culture. This was followed by an interactive debate on the role of national, global and diasporic histories within education.

While the social justice element of the Peckham Cultural Institute project was perhaps less tangible there are a number of elements of the Local Roots/Global Routes project that address a more explicit social justice agenda. In the first instance, the project was focused on creating educational resources for local schools that address issues of race and identity. Frederickson and Petrides (2008) note that since the 1980s there has been concern about the lower achievement levels of particular minority ethnic groups in Britain and ‘consequent exclusion from higher education and employment opportunities’. This is still a big problem across Britain but boroughs like Hackney are proactively trying to address the issue. By working in conjunction with Hackney Museum and Archives and local Hackney schools the Legacies of British Slave-ownership project created educational resources that challenged representations of race and offered young people of all racial backgrounds a more honest appraisal of their heritage. During the project, it became apparent that there was a need for more positive representation of race in the classroom. For instance, the education packs noted that ‘Students only encounter African and Caribbean history in the context of slavery’. This affects students’ self-esteem and ability to engage with what they are being taught because they don’t have access to different histories that allow them to see a broad range of African roles and societies. Feedback from both staff and students was that they wanted to see a wider representation of Black histories in the education packs. Teachers also asked for more contextual information so that they had the confidence to answer students’ questions around the subject (Jackson, 2015). It is hoped that the educational resources created by the project will continue to contribute to improving rates of achievement among ethnically diverse students in the borough.

The second element of the Local Roots/Global Routes project to address a social justice agenda was the restoration of hidden or misrepresented histories. It has been argued that the suppression of narratives which reveal the brutality and pervasiveness of enslavement related activities has worked to the benefit of the slave owning classes. Hooks (1992) claims that the past has been erased and denied to the extent that we are completely ignorant of our own history. What we see now is a mass media littered with negative or stereotyped representations of race, what Hooks describes as the ‘colonising gaze’. Cheddie (2012) argues that museums have particular responsibilities to communities whose history and heritage have been under-represented within collections, institutional structures and modes of address. The Legacies of British Slave-ownership project attempted to disrupt the colonising gaze by uncovering repressed historical narratives. By sharing knowledge of how widespread slave-ownership was and how many businessmen, philanthropists and private individuals made at least a proportion of their income from slavery associated activities the project has encouraged people of all races to reconsider their identity within the narratives of the past. The project also worked with artists and community consultants who acted as a bridge between the institution and the communities. Toyin Agbetu, the community consultant, played a key role in advising on the project, particularly around issues of language and representation. He argues from his position of a British African social rights activist that in forgetting contentious histories we risk repeating what has gone before. Agbetu believes that racism and its structural forces, many of which have been in place since the days of enslavement, continue to affect us today. He used the Local Roots/Global Routes project to challenge negative representations of African people from a local level, arguing that without local change it is impossible to effect change globally.

Challenges and benefits of collaborative practice

In presenting two such positive case studies it would be easy to pass over or ignore some of the challenges and difficulties associated with collaborative practice between universities and museums. Throughout the Share Academy project, partners expressed frustration at many of the same issues including the different languages used by academia and museums, different timescales (including different financial years) and the bureaucratic and slow moving nature of the universities, particularly in terms of legalities and finance. Seemingly simple things like the payment of freelancers or purchasing of materials can be frustratingly slow. In addition, universities often did not seem to be aware that museums have carefully curated activity programmes, planned years in advance and finely tuned to their audience’s wants and needs. On the other hand, museums exhibited a naïve expectation that just having inspiring or unique collections was enough. They vaguely anticipated that a PhD student or researcher would come and work on their collection, little guessing how pressurised academic schedules are, leaving little time for activities outside specific research interests. In terms of collaboration, almost all of the projects that received Share Academy funding underestimated how much time and effort they would have to invest in the partnership to make it successful. Working with students requires training and patient management (particularly where English is not their first language). Making research accessible in a format the public can understand is time consuming and actually co-producing research is much more labour intensive than acting alone. Collaboration turns out not to be the silver bullet that will address resource issues in either the university or museum sectors.

However, good things can and do happen as a result of collaborative practice. Working with new partners can unlock knowledge, lead to greater organisational sustainability and give both project partners new skills and experience. All of the Share Academy funded projects were assessed by an independent evaluator who concluded that participating in cross-sector collaborations brings significant value to those involved, with potential for positive and unforeseen benefits beyond the immediate project including the development of new and wider connections, reaching new audiences and improved visibility. A significant number of Share Academy funded projects have developed a sustainable legacy through building new relationships, exploring new opportunities, building on or expanding existing work and having a wider impact on society and communities. A number of the projects funded through Share Academy have lodged joint grant applications to continue and develop their work. Almost all of the partners who received Share Academy funding said they would continue to seek partnerships with other sectors. Many of them still work with their Share Academy partners and a good number have used the frameworks developed through Share Academy to approach other potential collaborators.

Although Share Academy was not explicitly designed to address social justice issues, there was a strong moral imperative behind the project. The application processes incorporated an insistence on reciprocity and the early identification of shared goals and benefits for both the university and museum partners, encouraging projects in receipt of a grant to be co-produced in a spirit of shared responsibility and equal opportunity. Another driving force for Share Academy was the idea of social responsibility, both for universities and museums. As ‘beacons of cultural production’ and ‘key players in cities and communities’ (Comunian and Gilmore, 2015), the role of universities in society is increasingly recognised. Similarly, museums have been recognised as institutions which have the capacity to combat disadvantage, racism and other forms of discrimination (Sandell, 2002). The fact that museums (particularly publicly funded museums) are already preoccupied with addressing social equality meant that many of the Share Academy funded projects delivered direct benefits to local communities through co-produced or co-curated activities. From working with LGBT communities to exploring the politics of utopianism through an artist-in-residence programme, many of the Share Academy projects incorporated a strong restorative or egalitarian element that contributed to what has been called the core economy of ‘the household, the neighbourhood, the community and civil society’ (see Stephens et al, 2008).

Conclusions and next steps

As Jackson (2015) notes, with the progress of the Share Academy programme, there has been a move away from transactional relationships, where, for example, museums see universities as a source of free labour, and universities see museums as a source of practical experience, towards transformational relationships where the skills of the partners are melded to create new products, ideas and relationships. It is this sort of high impact collaboration that Share Academy wants to foster and encourage in the future. Since 2015 Share Academy has been working with the National-Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement to map and codify university-museum partnerships across England and create the space, through networking events and digital support, for new partnerships to be formed. Information about this ongoing work can be found at <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/work-with-us/current-projects/museum-university-partnerships-initiative>.