

<p>Institution: University of Leicester (School of Museum Studies)</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: UoA36 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management</p>
<p>Title of case study: Stories of a <i>Different</i> Kind: stimulating and shaping new approaches to the representation of disabled people and disability history, arts and culture.</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This research was initiated in 2003 in recognition of the neglect by museums and galleries across the UK of disability history, arts and culture. Before the research began, disabled people – comprising the UK’s largest minority – were almost entirely absent from and/or misrepresented in the UK’s cultural heritage institutions. Three distinct but sequential projects investigated this and, through a programme of action research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stimulated and supported experimentation in museum exhibition and learning practice in the UK and internationally, enabling museums and galleries to confidently engage visitors in debates surrounding disability, disability rights, hate crime and, more broadly, discrimination and societal attitudes towards physical and mental difference; - developed new approaches to interpretation and audience engagement that have changed the ways in which general visitors and schoolchildren think about physical and mental differences and the rights and entitlements of disabled people; - pioneered new approaches to museum practice that have informed policy and set standards for best practice not only in the UK but internationally.
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) was established in 1999 with the explicit goal of pursuing research that would directly engage with cultural institutions and policy makers and funders, shape museum practice and benefit audiences. It subsequently initiated and led on three distinct research projects that have collectively impacted professional practice, public attitudes and policy making. The projects were conceived and carried out by Jocelyn Dodd (Senior Research Fellow and Director, RCMG) and Richard Sandell (Professor of Museum Studies):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (i) In 2004, a project funded through the AHRB’s Innovation Awards Scheme, entitled <i>Buried in the Footnotes</i>, set out to explore why museums - that were increasingly concerned to represent diverse communities through their collections, exhibitions and public programmes - had almost entirely overlooked the lives and experiences of disabled people. A survey of more than 200 museum and gallery institutions across the UK found an unexpected and extraordinarily rich (in scale and scope) body of material culture and artworks held within collections that linked in different ways to disability history and culture (1). However, this vast body of material was very rarely displayed to the public and, where it had been included in exhibitions, the object/artwork’s connection to disability was usually omitted from accompanying interpretation. Interviews with curators revealed a suite of anxieties and concerns about publicly presenting this material. These anxieties contributed to the collective absence of the UK’s largest minority, people with physical and mental differences, across the narratives presented in UK museums (1, 2, 3, 4). - (ii) A second project, (2006-2009) funded by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts and the Heritage Lottery Fund with contributions from participating museums (totalling £.5m) – entitled <i>Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries</i> – used collaborative action research, bringing together disability activists, researchers and museum professionals to shape nine new narratives (embodied in exhibitions, displays and educational resources for secondary school children) that were subsequently exhibited and utilised in programmes with schools and general visitors in museums across the UK ranging from major national institutions (the Imperial War Museum) to small volunteer run museums (such as Whitby Museum). The nine projects utilised collections ranging from pre-Raphaelite paintings at Birmingham Museums to the internationally known shoe collection in Northampton Museum. It addressed a major gap in museum practice by pioneering new ways of representing disability and the lives and histories of disabled people in order to challenge dominant (discriminatory, oppressive, stereotypical) representations of disabled people; engage audiences in debate; and engender in visitors’ awareness of and support for disability rights. This large scale project generated a number of insights: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • we identified ways in which museums could address the numerous ethical challenges of

- representing disabled people and disability history in the public sphere;
- we developed and evidenced an understanding of the ways in which visitors engaged with and responded to museum projects designed to inform attitudes towards difference;
- we identified those features of museum interpretive projects that served to nurture critical thinking in visitors and that were effective in enriching and sometimes transforming their understanding of disability. Indeed, a large-scale evaluation of visitor responses revealed the ways in which engagement with these narratives changed visitors (disabled and non-disabled) by offering them especially impactful, new ways of understanding disability (4, 5).

- (iii) A third project – *Stories of a Different Kind: new perspectives on disability and medicine*, funded by the Wellcome Trust and currently under development, supports curators and medical history experts, researchers, disabled artists, activists and advocates to generate new ways of presenting disability in medical museums (that hold some of the most significant collections relating to physical and mental differences but tend to display them in ways that are in conflict with contemporary, rights-based understandings of disability). The aims, objectives and methods have been conceived and refined through a collaborative process with key partners - the Science Museum (London), the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons, and the Royal College of Physicians Museum and are designed to create and publicly present a new narrative of disability and to use that narrative to stimulate and inform broader public and media debates around attitudes towards difference.

3. References to the research

Evidence of research quality: Outputs from the first research project described above were submitted as part of the RAE in 2008 with the School of Museum Studies being ranked as having the highest proportion (at 65%) of world leading researchers compared with any other subject area in the UK.

Research awards: The research was funded through three related projects, with awards totalling £552,260. Research awards were provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (Innovation Awards Scheme), (2003-4); Heritage Lottery Fund (2006-9); National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (2006-9) and Wellcome Trust (2012-13).

Research outputs:

1. Dodd, J., Sandell, R., Delin, A., Gay, J. (2004) *Buried in the Footnotes: the representation of disabled people in museum and gallery collections*, RCMG. Available online: <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/buried-in-the-footnotes/BITF2.pdf>
2. Delin, A., Dodd, J., Gay, J. and Sandell, R., (2005) 'Beggars, freaks and heroes? Museum collections and the hidden history of disability', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 20 (1): 5-19.
3. Dodd, J., Sandell, R., Jolly, D. and Jones, C. (2008) *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries*. RCMG. Available online: <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/rethinking-disability-representation-1/rdrsmallest.pdf>
4. Sandell, R. (2007) *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, London and New York: Routledge.
5. Sandell, R., Dodd, J. and Garland-Thomson, R. (Eds.) (2010) *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, London and New York: Routledge.

4. Details of the impact

The research has impacted policy and practice in museums and heritage bodies internationally and produced projects in UK museums that have been visited by more than half a million visitors. Impact can be categorised in four main areas:

(1) *Stimulating experimentation and shaping UK and international museum practice*

The research projects emerged out of recognition that, despite a pronounced international trend in museum practice towards more inclusive approaches to representation (evidenced in numerous museum projects that explicitly sought to redress the underrepresentation of women, minority ethnic and indigenous communities, faith groups and sexual minorities), the lives and histories of disabled people had been almost entirely overlooked. The research directly addressed this issue, revealing the hitherto unrecognised richness of collections that could be deployed to explore disability histories and generating an approach to the inclusion of disability-themed narratives that

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has been taken up by a wide range of museums. Christine Reich – Head of Research and Evaluation at the **Museum of Science in Boston**, USA comments that the research, ‘challenges us as museum professionals to consider the role we play in how people with disabilities are viewed and considered in contemporary society. [It] offers a new interpretative approach for presenting the lived experiences of people with disabilities in museums, one that portrays people with disabilities as individuals with agency rather than sources of pity, and that actively involves people with disabilities in the process’ (6). Specific examples of projects that have been inspired and/or informed by the research include:

- **The Royal College of Physicians Museum**, London, drew directly on our research to develop a new exhibition of rare 18th and 19th century portraits of disabled people from the museum’s collections that had never been publicly displayed before (7). The Museum used methodologies from our research to overcome the ethical challenges posed by the public display of the material that had previously been seen as too controversial or sensitive. Bridget Telfer (Audience Development Coordinator) stated: ‘All the thinking embedded in the Leicester research was applied to our exhibition, enabling us to break new ground and tackle a topic that was entirely new for the RCP’. The exhibition was shown at the museum in 2011 and then toured to venues in London, Leicester, Dublin and Leeds throughout 2012-13. The exhibition won an Ability Media International (AMI) award in 2011. The AMI awards, created by Leonard Cheshire Disability in 2009, identify outstanding creative projects that encourage a more inclusive world for disabled people. Heralded by the international panel of judges as ‘inspired’ and ‘challenging’, *Re-framing Disability* won the ‘Visual Arts Award 2011’.

- Sandell was appointed as an advisor to the **Smithsonian Institution’s *Museums For Us*** project in 2011. Sandell shared insights from the research to support this ground-breaking initiative that saw the Smithsonian working collaboratively with District of Columbia adults with intellectual disabilities and families with children with intellectual disabilities to co-research the experience of visiting a Smithsonian site and to co-develop practice-orientated guidelines with a focus on exhibitions and events programming (8).

- **English Heritage** – in 2012 English Heritage launched ‘Disability in Time and Place’; its first major project that sought to tell the story of how people with disabilities have shaped (and been shaped by) English landscapes and buildings. Rachel Hasted comments; ‘I had not known where to start and I considered myself a progressive museum professional who had been working on inclusive representation for some time. Rethinking Disability Representation was ground breaking, showing this was a subject that can be researched to a high level of scholarship as a serious historical topic. It opened up a whole world, it represented a new model, empowering and giving voice to disabled people’ (9).

- Participation in the research by the **Imperial War Museum** has impacted the organisation’s ongoing practice. Sam Heywood, Director of Public Programmes states: ‘Disability representation is now a cross departmental responsibility with curators, historians, a learning officer and designer discussing the issues. One of the new WWI galleries that will open in 2014 will look at medicine and disability, the impact on people’s lives after they left the forces. Without the RDR project, we would not have been so aware or well prepared to tackle this topic’ (10).

- Following widespread dissemination of the findings, specifically targeting practitioner constituencies, RCMG has received numerous approaches by curators and exhibition makers inspired to present their collections in new ways; from the **Wordsworth Museum** in Cumbria (who wanted to change the way they presented and discussed Wordsworth’s poem ‘Idiot Boy’) to Cardiff Castle’s **Museum of the Welsh Soldier** that was keen to use the research to develop a project that could explore impairments that are acquired during times of conflict; to **Tunbridge Wells Museum** that sought advice on the redisplay of historical figures with restricted growth. Liz Douglas, Documentation Assistant comments; ‘I was interested in developing a display around this theme – nothing like that has been done here. The research made a new approach possible for the museum’.

(2) *Challenging prejudice and changing public attitudes*

The nine museum projects developed as part of the action research project, *Rethinking Disability Representation*, were visited by more than 562,268 visitors during 2008-9 and some of these displays remain open to the public today. A mixed methods evaluation of visitors’ responses to these nine projects (capturing and analysing more than 1,700 individual visitors’ responses) revealed that the project had had a significant positive impact on visitors’ attitudes to disability,

challenging stereotypes and prompting more empathetic ways of thinking and talking about disability (3, 5).

(3) Informing cultural policy

The research has generated considerable interest amongst practitioners and policy makers internationally. Rachel Hasted, former Head of Social Inclusion and Diversity at **English Heritage** (2013) states that the research, 'has impacted on the development of policy, consultation, archive and record management and online interpretation at English Heritage' (9) and informed the approach taken in their major project launched in 2012, *Disability in Time and Place*, that reveals how disabled peoples' lives are integral to the heritage all around us. Heather Smith, Equality Specialist at the **National Trust** (2013), comments; 'The research has informed us of how we can tell stories of disabled people in an appropriate manner. We are now developing strategy and practice in this area' (11).

Since 2008, we have accepted invitations to share the research findings with non-HEI groups (museum professionals, arts agencies, government bodies concerned with culture and education) in Taiwan, Korea, the US, Sweden, Holland, Canada, Australia and Japan. **The Canada Council for the Arts**, developed a Disability and Deaf arts strategy and experimented with new approaches to curation through projects bringing together artists, historians, scholars and art enthusiasts who are Deaf or disabled within the City of Ottawa. RCMG's research was highlighted as instrumental in shaping these initiatives. **Museums Australia**, the strategic body responsible for museum support and development across Victoria directs practitioners and museum managers to research by Dodd and Sandell for guidance and direction to support their long-term strategic objective of 'ensuring equal access' to all museums.

(4) Supporting the work of disability advocates and disability rights advocates

The research has raised awareness amongst disability advocates and rights groups of the important role that museums and other cultural institutions play in framing public understandings of disability. The Director of Disability Awareness in Action, Dame Rachel Hurst, stated at the launch of *Rethinking Disability Representation* in 2008, following the presentation of 9 high profile museum projects across the UK, that the project had had a significant impact not only on museums but also on disability communities in raising their awareness of the potential of museums to present positive representations of disability (3). Tony Heaton, Chief Executive of SHAPE - the leading organisation for disability arts in the UK - comments: 'I use the research to showcase examples of best practice and models of engagement to support new developments with client organisations across the arts, heritage and museum sectors' (12). Art Beyond Sight, a US based organisation that campaigns for greater disability equality in the arts and cultural sectors appointed Sandell to its Project Advisory Board in 2012 and is using the research findings to inform an initiative, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, to develop a curriculum and training resources on disability and inclusion for young museum professionals (13).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

(6) Reich, C. (2011) Review in *Museums and Social Issues*, vol. 6, no 2: 239-43.

(7) Royal College of Physicians (2011), *Reframing Disability: portraits from the Royal College of Physicians*, RCP.

(8) Smithsonian Institution (2011), *Museums for Us: exploring museums with people with intellectual disabilities*, <http://museumsforus.wordpress.com/about-the-museums-for-us-project/>

Evidence relating to the value in stimulating and informing new practices across the sector:

(9) Former Head of Social Inclusion and Diversity, English Heritage

(10) Director of Public Programmes, Imperial War Museum

(11) Equality Specialist, National Trust

(12) Chief Executive, SHAPE

(13) Executive Director, Art Beyond Sight