

Institution: University of Reading
Unit of Assessment: 34A Art and Design
Title of case study: Enhancing access and interpretation in museums and heritage sites for people with learning disabilities.
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research by the University of Reading's Kate Allen has led to innovative strategies to enable access to, and enhance the experience of, museum and heritage sites for people with learning disabilities. Uniquely, this research has involved working with this user group as co-researchers in on-site museum workshops, to develop interactive electronics that activate objects from the collections as an alternative to conventional interpretation for all visitors. As well as the development of interactive exhibits and displays, the impact of this pioneering work includes the direct experience of researchers and museum staff participating in workshops and the dissemination of these new ideas and methods to a range of practitioners.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Allen has researched within the field of participatory art practice since the 1980s. Examples include the Barton Wall project (2006) in Oxfordshire, which involved a series of workshops with local people, including children excluded from school, to explore ideas of community cohesion. These workshops aimed to represent the thoughts of alienated and other young people (including through the presentation of artworks) to the local community in order to involve them in a discussion about their environment.</p> <p><u>Access to Heritage Project</u></p> <p>Allen's specific interests in the field of museum access developed through her participation in the Access to Heritage Project (2008-9), commissioned by Mencap Liverpool, where she worked with local artists to produce a Sensory Trail at Speke Hall, a historic manor house in the area (see accessible project blog at http://accesstoheritageproject.blogspot.co.uk/). The project involved, as co-researchers, members of the Access to Heritage Forum - a group of people with learning disabilities who work to help heritage venues to improve access, interpretation and the 'visitor experience' for the benefit of all visitors. The trail was developed through a series of 10 workshops focused on the sensory experience of exhibits at Speke Hall and the production by workshop participants of five new artworks, including a copy of <i>Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management</i>, which releases scents of herbs and spices when the pages are opened, and a box containing a replica of a portion of stucco moulding from the ceiling and a mirror, so that users can simultaneously view and feel the mouldings. Launched on 22 June 2009, the trail's exhibits are still in use and very popular with visitors to the Hall.</p> <p><u>Sensory Objects</u></p> <p>In 2011, as a development of this research, Allen made a successful bid to the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for a further project: 'Interactive multisensory objects developed for and by people with learning disabilities' (henceforth known in this case study as 'Sensory Objects'). This initiative, described further at www.sensoryobjects.com, is a unique collaboration between Allen, the Access to Heritage Forum, the School of Systems Engineering at the University of Reading and the Rix Centre, University of East London. Building on the learning from the Access to Heritage Project, the objectives of Sensory Objects are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • create a series of interactive, multisensory objects that replicate or respond to artworks or other objects of cultural significance in our national collections; • work with people with learning disabilities as co-researchers, experts and consultants in their disability, engaging them in a process of generating and designing sensory objects, that start with an individual's perspective, yet cater for a wide range of people, and • explore techniques for developing interactive sensory objects, focusing on iterative design through participant workshops, with a view to developing best-practice guidelines as a basis for future development and providing a lasting resource for museums and heritage

sites.

The project comprises a series of workshops that are fundamentally experimental and exploratory in character. The academic research team works together with the participant researchers with learning disabilities to develop interactive art objects, and in so doing records their successes and failures. The academic researchers use their own expertise as artists and technologists in guiding the exploration to allow it to achieve its creative and interactive potential. For example, co-researchers produced household objects such as cushions and loaves of bread which react to touch by playing recordings made in workshops, including the sounds of a Victorian kitchen and an interview with one of the volunteer guides at Speke Hall describing the type of sounds that would have been heard at the house in the past. In particular, the investigators are exploring the potential of newly developed easy-to-use electronics in making the experience of members of the user group more vital and meaningful. In this instance, the participatory research is augmented through the use of electronics such as Arduino (an open-source electronics prototyping platform based on flexible, easy-to-use hardware and software, intended for artists, designers and others interested in creating interactive objects and environments).

Each of the project's three phases is based in a different museum location and environment, starting in 2012 at Speke Hall, moving to the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), University of Reading in 2013, working with students from Reading College LLD/D (Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities) Department and then concluding at the British Museum, London in 2014. The first six workshops at each venue focus primarily on concept design, and a further six on refining prototypes. The activity in each year culminates in a public event and seminar. In 2013, this included the 'Sensory Stories' event, held at Speke Hall; the 'Sensory Stories Retold' seminar at the Museum of Liverpool; and an interactivity exhibit at the prestigious Human Factors in Computing Systems conference in Paris on the theme of 'Changing Perspectives'. The research group will also give a workshop/exhibition presentation at the Seventh International Conference on the Inclusive Museum in Los Angeles, in August 2014 (see www.cgpublisher.com/conferences/289/proposals/index.html)

Allen joined the Unit in 2002.

3. References to the research

Allen, Hwang, Minnion, Kwiatkowska, Weldin, Lowe 'Interactive Sensory Objects for Access to Heritage' 2013. http://hci2012.bcs.org/demos/hci2012_submission_221%20%281%29.pdf

Research cited in:

Museum Education Monitor, April edition 2013 <http://www.mccastle.com/Public/MEM.aspx>
Museum Education Monitor (MEM) tracks and records research and resources in museum education worldwide. To date there are over 500 subscribers in countries around the world, including Canada, U.S.A., U.K., Australia & New Zealand, India, China, France, Germany, Sweden, Brazil

Smith, H., A Warmer Welcome, The National Trust's access project, *Access by Design*, Issue 124, 2010: 24
http://issuu.com/accessbydesign/docs/access_by_design_autumn_2010_issue_124

Grant, K., Accessible information - what to create, and how to do it, *Access by Design*, Issue 120, 2009: 18
Access by Design journal is published by The Centre for Accessible Environments(CAE). CAE is the UK's leading authority on inclusive design

Heather J. L. Smith, Head of Access for All, The National Trust, 2009, in response to a draft proposal of 'Sensory Objects [...] AHRC proposal sent to the National Trust. "The heritage sector is waking up to the benefits of using technology in creative ways and making the usability as easy and intuitive as possible, so it is timely."

Funding: Allen (PI) AHRC, 'Interactive sensory objects developed for and by people with learning disabilities', 2011, £465,673.

4. Details of the impact

The participatory research carried out in the two aforementioned projects has made a major contribution in the context of access and interpretation in museums and other heritage venues for people with learning disabilities. Specifically and uniquely, the projects engaged this user group as co-researchers and demonstrated that such targeted consultation and participation is crucial to the success of research in these fields.

Involvement and empowerment of people with learning disabilities

The people with learning disabilities used as co-researchers were empowered by their direct involvement in the creative processes of production and had access to technology that enabled them to appreciate its purpose and potential uses (see [http://hci2012.bcs.org/demos/hci2012_submission_221%20\(1\).pdf](http://hci2012.bcs.org/demos/hci2012_submission_221%20(1).pdf)).

Writing about the Access to Heritage Project in *Design Journal* (2008), the Visitor Experience Officer at Speke Hall stated that this involvement was ‘key to the successful development of the sensory trail’ at Speke Hall for the benefit of other users (with and without learning disabilities), carers and heritage organisations now able to benefit from exhibits tailored to their use.

As the President of Mencap wrote in 2005: “Hands-on exhibits bring a space to life, giving a greater understanding and meaning to cultural heritage. This is especially important for people with learning disabilities.” For this social group, hands-on experience of cultural objects has, in recent years, become an important approach in promoting an understanding of cultural heritage, as highlighted by the Access to Heritage Forum, and in response many museums and heritage sites have established ‘handling collections’. However, because these materials are usually chosen by the curators rather than determined by the user group, many of them are deemed to be too delicate to be handled by people with learning disabilities and so such individuals often have to be limited to looking at pictures in books. Key to Allen’s work is the attempt to allow this user group to enjoy a more direct encounter with museum artefacts (complementing conventional museum information), encouraging a shared ownership of public collections and their histories.

Communication beyond the immediate research group is facilitated by the use of blogs, seminars, conference papers and events, as well as the exhibits and displays themselves at museum sites. To date, the group has made three public presentations of the research:

Successful events

The Sensory Stories event, held at Speke Hall on 21 March 2013, was attended by over 100 people, including curatorial and education museum staff and disability workers. The day showcased the co-researchers’ work, including workshop tasters and displays of the interactive sensory objects to the general public. The event was covered by a feature in the *Liverpool Echo*.

The Sensory Stories Retold seminar, held at the Museum of Liverpool on 7 May 2013, brought together the research group of 20 people and 40 delegates, including museum curators, academics and disability experts, in a discussion about the project’s impact in its initial year and the future direction of research. As an example of the feedback received the Head of Arts and Wellbeing at Sense (an organisation supporting the rights of the deafblind community), commented: ‘... you have inspired me to think about ways to encourage the use and exploration of multimedia technology in some of the narrative and storytelling projects and co-ordinate with children with dual-sensory impairment.’

Other feedback emphasised the importance of including people with learning disabilities as co-researchers. It was noted that in developing interpretation at museums it is typical to approach the task from the common denominator of a group of people with disabilities and make generalised assumptions about them. In contrast, Allen’s projects adopt the unique approach of interacting with individuals with disabilities and then spreading out to the wider community – a method that brings alternative perspectives and empowers the user group.

Dissemination and usage of research

In addition to the above-mentioned events, Allen’s research is being disseminated through the Sensory Objects blog, which provides narrative accounts and images to illustrate the development of the project and the research model in practice, and to facilitate engagement with the initiative by

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a wider community through, for example, downloadable resources such as a 'cookbook' of workshop activities. The Cookbook and workshop tools were developed with UROP students during July and August, the new kit was test at MERL on 5th Sept working with Reading Mencap, the Cookbook has been sent to attendees to the Sensory Stories Retold Seminar and others for feedback.

Visitor Experience staff at Speke Hall have enthusiastically embraced the new approach to interpretation that Allen's work has presented: 'It's a completely new perspective, which we're always open to [... T]he house's history is about people and people's stories and people's lives, so to get the people to comment on that is much healthier, it's much richer, it's less boring, it's not some textbook panel [...W]hat are the stories we need to bring out and how can we use this new technology to really bring those to life? I'd like all the National Trust properties to do it [...] I will be telling all [of them]'.

Allen's research informs the University of Reading Art Department's impact and teaching strategy. For instance, two students in the University's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme worked on the project over the summer 2013. The research has also led to the staging of interactive sculpture workshops for art students funded by Digitally Ready, a JISC-funded project under the Developing Digital Literacies programme (the project has been awarded further funding to continue in 2013-14). Project findings and outputs will be shared throughout the Higher Education sector. (see <http://introductiontointeractivesculpture.blogspot.co.uk/>)

Awards

The Access to Heritage Project won 'Best Community Arts Event or Group' at the 2008 DaDa (Deaf and Disabled Arts) Awards.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Accessible project blog at <http://accesstoheritageproject.blogspot.co.uk/> for coverage of the work of Allen and her colleagues.

Website: Interactive multisensory objects developed for and by people with learning disabilities: <http://www.sensoryobjects.com/>

Website page explaining the Cookbook: http://www.sensoryobjects.com/?page_id=1081

BBC interview at Speke Hall about the new Sensory Trail, as featured on Claire Hamilton's Drive Time show on BBC Radio Merseyside, in April 2009

Video interviews with Visitor Experience Officer at Speke Hall, and volunteers and co-researchers, 11 February, 2012 – transcription available upon request.

Online coverage:

<http://www.straycatmedia.org/sensory-stories/>

<http://tickyloewe.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/sensory-stories-speke-hall-21st-march.html>

<http://forum.mccastle.com/2013/05/interactive-sensory-objects-by-and-for.html>

Report on Sensory Stories Research Event in Liverpool Echo, April 23, 2013.

http://www.sensoryobjects.com/?page_id=875

Collections Assistant at Warwickshire Museum Service – email correspondence citing usefulness of the sensory activities cookbook. (Available upon request)