

Enquiry-Based Learning in Museums: A Mechanism for Gallery Evaluation

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Abstract

This project worked with a cohort of secondary school students from Manchester schools to design, develop and deliver an evaluation of museum/ gallery practices with a view to informing redevelopment of The Mediterranean Gallery at The Manchester Museum. Students were introduced to the University, its students and its study pathways through a structured series of sessions over a three-month period. Students carried out evaluation of three museums outside the Manchester area and presented their findings at a celebration event at the end of the project. Student attitudes towards classics and archaeology were tracked at the beginning and end of the project and showed that students were aware of archaeology but not of classics. Their awareness and understanding of classics had improved by the project end. The student voice provided from this project will be fed into any further plans for redevelopment. Finally, it has provided the Museum, and those partner museums, with the means to effectively engage this cohort and uncover their opinions regarding the future of museum displays and the potential of Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL) with this age group.

Background

The University of Manchester is a nationally recognised centre for archaeology. The Museum's collections of Greek and Roman antiquities are designated and include items of national and international importance. The Museum's Mediterranean Gallery presents the various cultures and civilisations around the Mediterranean.

However, these displays are now about 15-years old and the changing social context of Britain in the 21st century prompts a reappraisal with a view to refurbishing the displays. This has to be done in an inclusive way that involves and responds to the ideas and needs of local people. A number of Manchester institutions have an interest in the teaching and promotion of Classical Archaeology, disciplines such as Classics, Ancient History, and Archaeology to name a few.

Rationale

Classics is the complex, interactive process of perceiving, understanding and debating the nature of our relationship to the world of the ancient Greeks and Romans. By encouraging students to take an interest in classics we are enabling them to enquire, question and debate; and to be aware of the huge influence of the ancient world on their own lives and the ways in which it has been interpreted over the years.

This Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning (CEEEL)-funded project actively inspires Manchester school pupils to take an interest in Archaeology and the Classics. There is a real opportunity to involve students from the city's schools with the University and to engage them in a project that will inform new gallery displays at The Manchester Museum.

The school students involved in this project will build upon key skills such as group working, effective enquiry, key questioning, reporting and devising work plans. It is hoped that through this project these pupils will develop an interest in Museums alongside an interest in Classics and Archaeology. Outputs from this project will be used to inform future gallery redevelopments.

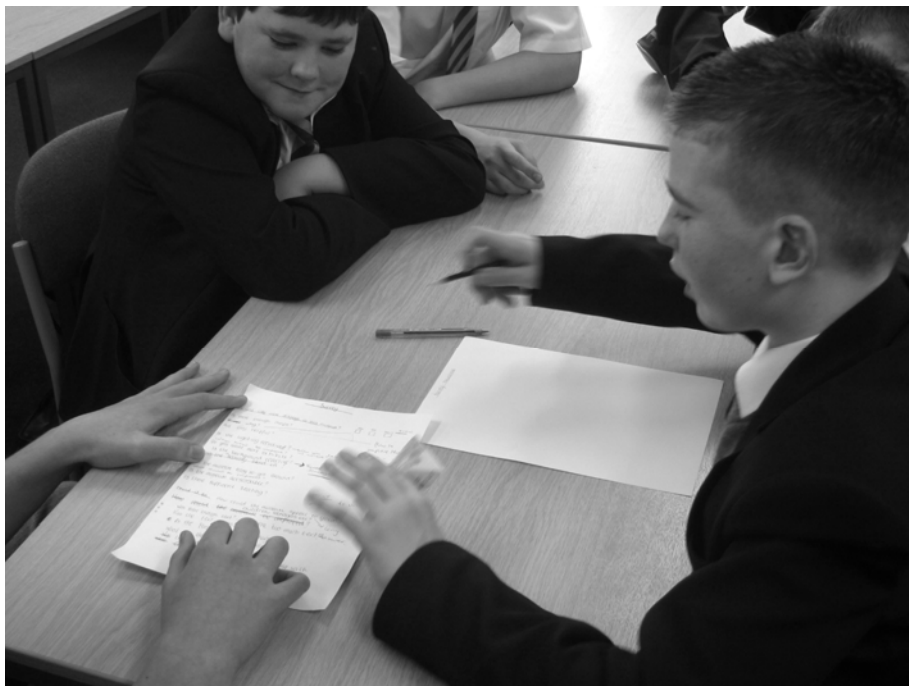


Figure 1 Students working on their questionnaires.

Approach

A project timetable was drawn up with six sessions plus a site visit. Each University session was held either at The Manchester Museum or within a room in the Faculty of Humanities. Sessions were also designed to include a short refreshment break. All sessions were delivered where possible on a Wednesday afternoon in order to accommodate a secondary school timetable.

In the first three sessions, students were introduced to The Manchester Museum, the subjects of Classics and Archaeology and to each other. This was done to provide students with appropriate background knowledge and skills to formulate their own questioning and enquiry. Academics and teaching staff from the University and the Museum provided session content and activities for the programme. Students were also given the opportunity to explore the galleries and see behind-the-scenes of the museum.

In following sessions, students began to direct their own learning from the information that had been provided to them through the previous sessions. Students worked in groups to devise their own questionnaires: one for finding out the visitor response to

the museum gallery; and the other to capture information about the type and form of museum display. Small-scale evaluative work was then carried out with the students in session two, where their opinions on The Manchester Museum were canvassed and recorded. Students also had a small amount of computer time to research their museum.

Following the site visits where students used their questionnaires, they were asked to write up a report and present their findings. The students were looking for evidence of successful Classical Archaeological displays at other museums that could contribute to the refurbishment of the Mediterranean Gallery. We were looking for evidence of the students being engaged and stimulated by the project. Much of this evidence will be qualitative.

Each of the three student groups was allocated a postgraduate student and a museum to study: Trinity High School, Hulme studied the Liverpool Museum; Altrincham College of Arts looked at the Hull Museum; and Little Moss High School, Tameside examined Newcastle University Museums.

The Widening Participation (WP) office within the Faculty of Humanities recruited a total of 30 students by using existing links with schools and teachers. Eleven students were recruited from Little Moss High School and Trinity High, with a further eight recruited from Altrincham College of Arts. In addition, the WP Humanities office also recruited postgraduate (PG) students to assist with the project. The office also explored the possibility of working with A Level/Key Stage 5 (KS5) pupils from a local sixth form college. Eventually, we recruited four KS5 pupils from Xaverian College who volunteered to become part of the project but were unable to attend any site visits.

Evaluation

Prior to commencing this project, students were asked to fill in a short evaluative questionnaire based upon Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (1991), which provides information about their attitudes and the attitudes of their peers. According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TpB), there are three components that guide human behaviours. These are people's attitudes towards something, people's subjective norms (perceived attitudes of significant others, such as parents and peers) and their perceived

behavioural control (extent to which they believe they are equipped with the knowledge/skills to carry something out). This provides a baseline against which we could track attitudinal change.

Participating PG students and KS5 students were asked to complete a diary before each session outlining their thoughts and feelings on the upcoming session. After its completion, students were then asked to summarise how they thought the session actually went. The students were asked to be honest and as open as possible when recording in their diaries. One of the postgraduate students, who was also a CEEBL Student Intern, collected anecdotal data, took digital images and recorded direct observations from the sessions with all three student cohorts. Combined, these sources of information provided rich, qualitative data for evaluation purposes.



Figure 2 Postgraduate students facilitating student work.

Analysis of pre- and post-visit data shows that there was a strong increase in awareness of Classics (from 45% to 62% of students stating that they had an awareness); however, attitudes towards Classics, as a subject, remain unchanged. The latter findings are thought to be a direct result of school teachers, involved with this project, selecting pupils who already had an interest in this topic area. Pupils may also have been focusing more on Archaeology; there was an increase of 14%, with 96% of the students stating they had an awareness of the discipline. With regard to skill building, 100% of students stated that they like working in groups.

Teachers reported that the students' skill sets had improved, particularly in terms of their awareness of the opinions of others. One teacher used elements of the project to develop the competence curriculum and created a peer evaluation mechanism for a school-based exhibition.

The diaries of the PG students highlighted several common themes. There was a sense of trepidation at first:

Currently, I am a little nervous about the first session that we are holding tomorrow. I hope that the children are going to be responsive and involved in the handling exercise, which is the first thing we will be doing with our groups. I am sure that they will be interested in the objects.

To becoming more relaxed as the project progressed:

...overall I have really enjoyed the experience so far. It has been great to get involved in a new style of teaching and learning, which I feel has really engaged the pupils and got them used to thinking in a different way to that which they normally would at school. The experience of working more as a team in facilitating has also been positive.

To feeling proud of their student group:

They [my group] all seemed to have really enjoyed the project and had some really good ideas for the museum, which I hope will be considered seriously.

All pupils reported that they had previously been to another museum/gallery. A vast majority, greater than 95%, stated that they found museums interesting, friendly and important. Students also felt that their parents and peers had or displayed positive attitudes towards museums. 72% of participating students stated that they would return to The Manchester Museum.



Figure 3 Students at their final presentations.

Project Findings

This project has shown that students of this age range, KS3, can effectively use EBL to create a project with meaning and impact. Pupils were set tasks relating to a 'problem' (how to redisplay a gallery), devised and carried out their own small-scale investigations (questionnaires and site visits) and were part of a research project. During to the time period involved and the level of the students, they were unable to pose their own research question for investigation, but every student engaged with the challenge at hand.

Pupils identified a number of factors that would create an improved visiting environment. These factors included better lighting, more seating, better signage, clearer labels and having more objects on display. All three groups identified that all museums could improve their offerings to younger visitors by either selecting better objects or increasing the opportunities for interactivity.

Key points made by students for consideration in future gallery developments are outlined below:

...there was a clear layout of the artefacts, but the presentation of them was quite dull and plain. This was due to the fact that all the

artefacts were almost all in glass cases, apart from the statues, with between 15 to 25 items in each section.

Visitors felt that being able to handle objects, or use touch screen computers, games or videos, or dress up would be useful interactive elements.

...experience the environment of the time period, for example through sound effects, reconstructions etc.

Make lighting appropriate to allow you to engage and feel like you are part of the exhibit.

We would like to see text to be simplified for all ages to understand.

Make navigating your way around the museum much easier.

Perhaps arrange artefacts in a more flowing way. Starting with earlier times and ending at a more modern time period.

Further Development

If this project were to be repeated a number of simple changes would need to be effected. Firstly, as pointed out by one of the PG students, using the same classrooms for the duration of the project would help to familiarise the students with the University environs. This would prevent groups from getting lost on the campus. Wall space could also be allocated to each group so that they had a 'base' from which to work.

Secondly, PG students felt that, although the introductory sessions were important in creating group cohesiveness, the amount of time spent on this could be condensed so that pupils could begin the project whilst they were still highly motivated. Opportunities for practice with newly devised questionnaires could be increased to develop pupil confidence further and would have aided focus for the tasks ahead. In sessions involving the project outcomes (presentation, report, etc) pupils should be allowed to choose the appropriate route for dissemination for themselves.

I felt that they [students] were not so focussed on Manchester and what could be done differently there (or kept the same). It would also have conformed more closely to EBL models as it would have allowed the pupils to learn through experiencing and doing things rather than only having one opportunity to get it right.

Student recruitment would be more tailored to identify those students who had not previously expressed an interest in the topic areas and who still satisfy WP recruitment guidelines. This would provide more realistic data that may identify an attitudinal shift. Follow-up reflective work would also be built in, which would include project staff visiting schools to find out what impact the project had on the pupils' skills and attitudes, as well as collecting the teachers' feedback.

The Manchester Museum and the Faculty of Humanities have used this project to develop a mechanism to engage young people with traditionally hard to reach subjects. Currently, both parties are looking to identify avenues where this model could be effectively applied again. One other possible route for development would be utilising this programme of evaluation for use with an adult audience or with youth groups such as the Museums Youth Board or Young Archaeologist Club (YAC).

Adopting a consultative approach to the redevelopment of the Museum galleries is a high priority for The Manchester Museum. This project is one way that illustrates that this process has begun.

References

Ajzen, I., 1991. The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50, 179-211.