

Museums, Communities and the Representation of Place: co-creating stories of art on Tyneside

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Structure

- Introduction non-academic partner
- The project: co-creating stories of art on Tyneside as part of a new permanent display
- Responses to AHRC prompts

Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle

- TWAM: 12 museums and galleries across Tyne and Wear
- 340 staff
- Current budget £14-15 million per annum
- Laing founded in 1901.
- Visitor figures 2007-8: 257, 655



The project:

to contribute to the redevelopment of an important permanent display - Art on Tyneside - at the Laing Art Gallery and to study how people construct identities in reference to place (North-East of England) and its visual representations.

funded through the AHRC's
Museums, Galleries, Libraries
and Archives Research Grants.
Value: £345,637.



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

In a nutshell

Our research will explore the relationships between art, identity and place in order to develop audience-generated content in various media for display purposes. This content, and insights derived from the research, will be integrated within, and add value to, the redevelopment of an important permanent display at the Laing Art Gallery.

The project (2008-2010)

Involves working with:

- families
- local, regular visitors already familiar with the Laing
- specialist interest visitors (Friends of the Laing)
- non-visiting members of specific, local community groups
- artists and representatives of the north-east arts community (people who work in and visit other regional art venues)





1. The reasons for you initiating partnership working and what you hoped to get out of it.

- To allow access to research expertise
- To specifically support the redevelopment of a gallery at the Laing art Gallery
- To develop staff (and the organisation) through engagement with an academic team
- To further develop the relationship between TWAM and ICCHS

The reasons for you initiating partnership working and what you hoped to get out of it.

- Opportunism (grant funding)
- Societal impact
- High visibility project
- Using cultural resources to ask questions about society, identity, behaviour, knowledges, representation etc.
- Opportunity to be involved in practice, from a research point of view
- Creating interaction between cultural resources and communities → theorisation

How the partnership was established

- Existing strong relationship between the partners involving practical collaboration - TWAM staff teaching within ICCHS etc; CDA; Great North Museum relationship, placements for ICCHS students.
- TWAM and ICCHS specifically came together to discuss research opportunities – this project was of strong interest to both teams.

Challenges faced in establishing or maintaining partnership/how these were overcome.

Distinct research and gallery aims (research outcomes vs display outcomes)	Construction of joint project documentation with shared aims Joint project board with shared chairing etc
Practical issues re sorting out budgets etc	Open discussion; strong trust relationship between partners and commitment to solving problems
Difference in timetables	Open relationship, discussion of issues, strong trust relationship
Different working methods/styles between academic and practitioner teams	Open relationship, discussion of issues, strong trust relationship

Challenges faced in establishing or maintaining the partnership and how these were overcome.

Distinct research and gallery aims (research outcomes vs display outcomes)	Quality plan; project board, interpretation workshops; show and tell sessions; summary documents
Practical management issues e.g. finance, FEC, procurement, IP, contracting/commissioning,	One person designated to oversee. Partnership arrangement at outset specifying relationship. Close liaison with uni Grants and Contracts team and TWAM management; attention to detail
Communication between various parties (project board, curators, education staff, outreach, public, artists, designers, community groups, gatekeepers)	Difficult! Making conscious effort to keep all relevant people in the loop. Designating specific responsibilities to team members. NEEDS a full-time RA! Needs full support from senior staff.

Challenges faced in establishing or maintaining the partnership and how these were overcome

Different working methods/styles between academic and practitioner teams	Recognising each other's professional practices and working preferences; regular meetings; co-chairing of meetings; joint agenda setting
Timetable – different working speeds at different times	Planning and reviewing GANTT chart; regular research team meetings; being flexible and responsive

4. How the experience of partnership working compares to your expectations

- “I think we have got more out of it than I anticipated - in order to do this we have had to relinquish some control and it’s important that partners are open, as we have both been, about what can and can’t be negotiated.
- I’m really excited by what is coming out of the project - it’s different to what I expected, but better – more in depth, more consultative, more interesting. I also feel we are all learning through the process – I certainly am!” *Iain Watson*

4. How the experience of partnership working compares to your expectations

- Very positive - even more beneficial than anticipated
- Learning all the time – some of this feeds back into teaching and other areas of individual research
- Developing more project management skills and confidence than anticipated which affects other aspects of work
- Mixed according to prior experiences/roles

4. How the experience of partnership working compares to your expectations

- Hadn't anticipated how much people's own professional practices would bear on the process and project
- Have had to let go of some control over research process
- Hadn't anticipated how anxious the gallery environment would make some participants
- Has helped us to reflect upon the ways in which we do research (not anticipated)
- Has created other opportunities for collaboration

5. The benefits of the partnership to you.

- Two-way skills sharing
- Synergistic relationships where partners have complementary expertise
- Development and use of a specific methodology
- Working together to target a particular audience and sharing specific techniques that are appropriate

5. The benefits of the partnership to you.

- Staff development
- Working together to look at lessons learned and reflection on organisational change
- Specific opportunity to access academic research - whilst TWAM staff are engaged in knowledge and information based activities all the time, we are not generally resourced to carry out academic research at this level

5. The benefits of the partnership to you.

- Generating new research and providing us with answers to our research questions
- Ability to use a gallery as a laboratory – access to staff, building, audiences, resources etc.
- Providing insight into the experiences and subjectivities of community members
- Greater awareness of museum professionals' working environment, constraints, drivers etc.

With the benefit of hindsight...

- Double-checking clarity over budgetary responsibilities and expectations at outset
- Methodology is complicated especially in context of a partnership project – could have been less multifaceted (?)
- Should have budgeted for more investigators' time
- Should have allowed more lead-in time to recruit RA