Art : Design : Media
Subject Centre

Title: Creating curators: using digital platforms to help students learn in art collections.

Abstract: This case study describes a collaboration between Imperial College and University College London in which science and technology students at Imperial were asked to create an online exhibition from artworks they had studied first-hand in UCL's art collections. We describe the structure of the activity and its fit with the learning style of the students, the course aims, and the schedule of assessment. We conclude that combining first-hand study of artworks with the use of digital platforms to develop key skills associated with visual analysis, critical thinking and archival research, has obvious resonance for current and next generation learners.
Keywords: Peer mentors; partnerships; undergraduate learning in galleries

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The initial idea for this project came from the course tutor (Nick Grindle) after he attended a workshop in which members of staff from UCL Art Collections (led by Andrea Fredericksen), UCL Media Services and Learning Technologies Support Services (LTSS) presented ways teachers and students could use different interactive digital platforms and develop e-learning resources using objects from UCL's art collections.

Imperial College provides world-class education and research in science, engineering, management and medicine. The students doing this project were studying a course called 'Art of the Twentieth Century', which was one of about 20 humanities courses, ranging from music technology to philosophy, that students could elect to study as a minor supplementary subject. The students ranged from first to final years, about 25% were international students, and all courses were taught at first-year undergraduate level. Student numbers on 'Art in the Twentieth Century' varied between 20 to 30.

Studying artworks first hand is central to art history's cognitive and social profiles. Artworks are the 'what' of the discipline. First-hand study is the 'how'. Nick's research into student motivation found that students at Imperial were adept at setting their own goals and working towards them. Having identified this trait in their approach to learning, he sought a way of exposing them to art that would facilitate a relatively high degree of self-determined engagement, hence the double meaning of our title 'Creating curators': the curators would be creative, but before they could be so we had to 'create' them as curators. Nick and Andrea both thought that working directly with the art objects, using platforms with which they would feel most comfortable, would manage to do this.

It was decided that rather than using a large gallery, students could better get to grips

with works of art in the flesh in the environment of a Museum's study room. Nick talked to Andrea, who is curator of UCL's art collections, and it was decided that the Strang Print Room at UCL was an appropriate resource to use. We came to this decision for a number of reasons:

- o Accessibility: the Strang Print Room is open every afternoon, and not far from Imperial College.
- o It was supervised: students could talk to Andrea or other curators about the works they were studying.
- o Many of the artists represented in the collections are still practising. The students could contact them personally.
- o The collections held a wide range of twentieth century work, including many works by Slade undergraduates, postgraduates, and teachers. This offered an alternative to the canonical narrative of modern art as presented in large public collections, while keeping students in dialogue with it.

By way of describing the learning activity we include an edited version of the coursework rubric as it was given to the students. We've provided a retrospective commentary in italics, paying attention to issues around implementation and evaluation. The timeframe for the whole activity was about ten weeks.

Rubric: coursework 3
This coursework is based on the art collections at UCL. Working in groups of five, I will be asking you to choose ten works of art from 1950s to present day and display them in an exhibition to be hosted on Flickr, with proper captions and a commentary for each picture. Your group should decide on a theme for the exhibition.

We chose Flickr because it is widely used, it is free, and it allows users to annotate specific areas of the image with pop-up text boxes, as well inserting more substantial text below the picture. Visitors to the site can add their own comments.

The reasons we're working with the collections at UCL are that they allow you to work with art first hand. Some of the most well-known artists in postwar Britain have studied at the Slade, such as Richard Hamilton and Paula Rego; and the collection offers a good range of work that in some ways is more diverse than the 'greatest hits' that we see in a large gallery, such as Tate Modern.

Your exhibition should be no longer than 5000 words long. This works out at about 900 words each, once you've given information about the work itself (artist, title, date, medium, dimensions, other information).

What you have to do
a) Go online and open a Flickr account (before 16 Feb). To do this you need to sign up with Yahoo. Please use the following formula for your yahoo account: surname.artc20@yahoo.co.uk. If you already have a Flickr account please create a new one for the purposes of this coursework.

Few of the students were familiar with Flickr but there were no reported problems setting it up. When it came to assessing the exercise the passwords were easily shared with the second marker and external examiner.

b) preliminary visit to UCL (18 or 19 Feb, 12.45-13.15)

We found this was a crucial stage. Andrea Fredericksen planned a super introductory session, showing the students a range of prints and talking to them about UCL Art Collections. The big outcome was that the students became

familiar both with the physical environment where they were working and the staff who would help them. The brevity of the visit was helpful.

c) second visit to UCL to view works (need to book: college.art@ucl.ac.uk). You should aim to spend around 2 hours there.

Having had a well-structured initial visit to the art collections, the students returned to view the collections at leisure, select objects, and study them. We found that some groups returned a number of times, in spite of the journey (about 40 minutes) and busy timetables as the end of the Spring term approached.

d) contact artist(s) to arrange permissions for copyright. You need to do this by letter, not email.

This was a legal requirement. Andrea thought the students would be glad to experience the wider range of responsibilities related to art exhibitions.

e) arrange to photograph works (need to book: college.art@ucl.ac.uk).

This worked well, since it created an activity which helped the students to think about the work as a material object – something to be handled, positioned, lit up – in addition to thinking about it as a representation.

f) host works on Flickr and write commentary for each one

This was clarified under the following heading 'marking criteria'.

You may wish to co-ordinate a joint visit to take photographs, to save time and resources.

Marking criteria
Although this coursework is in a different format from a coursework essay, I will be using similar criteria to mark it. The most important criteria are:

1) Knowledge about the art. This means some basic things, such as the artwork's size, when it was made and who by, and how it was made (ie. the medium). You may have to do some research about media and printmaking. You'll have to present this information clearly at the beginning of your commentary for each piece.

This worked well: most groups paid careful attention to the material properties of the artworks, whereas they often pass over these points when writing an essay.

2) Understanding of the art you select and discuss. This will be demonstrated through your writing about each piece, but most of all it will be shown through your choice of artworks as a whole. Think carefully about the reasons for your selection and what you hope to show by choosing these works. You might choose a historical theme (eg. Art in the 70s), or a media-based theme (eg. New techniques of printmaking) or a subject-based theme (eg. Animals in art, or abstract art).

This was the point at which the aim of the assessment and the form it took were most clearly aligned. Students 'got' the idea that an exhibition must have a rationale, but some found it difficult to clarify and explain their theme clearly. In retrospect it would have been helpful to spend time looking at examples of art exhibitions and talking to curators about how they choose works for exhibitions.

3) Analysis of the art. This can be in different forms: analysis of the work's appearance, analysis of the art's meaning, or even analysis of what people have said about the art, or perhaps the title. This will probably be the area in which you are best able to demonstrate a grasp of the kinds of subjects, themes and issues that we've discussed in class.

This was the stage at which we hoped the students would exploit Flickr's potential for integrating words and images to its full. However, many students were content to insert large chunks of text below the image, rather than on the image itself. A kind of conceptual barrier seemed to prevail between text and image.

Evaluation
The students enjoyed the activity …
- 'I think [reflective learning is] something we'll retain beyond the facts, learning about structuring our thoughts and arguments about a concept is an invaluable lesson'
- 'I really enjoyed working in a group'
- 'I found that I learnt about the overlap of the different movements whereas before I'd thought of them in separate 'boxes' but when looking at the paintings for the exhibition, some combined ideas that were from different movements which was initially confusing but it all sort of slotted in place towards the end'

… but there were also small problems:
- 'in our group particularly it was quite difficult collecting all of the images of the paintings as we weren't around in London during the Easter'
- 'It was very hard to get in touch with the artists, many of them had fallen off the face of the earth'.

The external examiner also liked it. Persistently flagging up the need for students to engage artworks face to face, she described the online exhibtion as a 'rare opportunity to work first hand with objects', and one that was responsive to the 'types of interest, confidence and commitment specific to students on the Imperial College Humanities programme'.

We welcomed the examiner's comments because we aimed to use the partnership between two institutions to help students from one part of the disciplinary spectrum (sciences and engineering) develop cognitive (eg. critical thinking) and social (eg. discursive verbal reasoning) skills in another area. We also aimed to develop an activity that was appropriate to what we knew about these students' learning styles.

Implementation was smooth, thanks to the positive charge of working in a supportive learning environment and the user-friendly nature of Flickr. The activity was aligned with previous assessment points (describe an artwork, present a critical analysis of texts about an artwork) and the material covered in lectures over the previous term and a half. Although it was the final assessment point, student feedback stressed the value of the activity as a formative, rather than a summative, exercise. In the words of one: 'I found that by applying the concepts (different art movements) learnt in the lectures helped to reinforce key points and made more sense'. It was also *perceived* to be a different kind of activity to the usual mode of assessment: 'it was so much more interesting than just an essay', said another.

As the only costs were the time spent on familiarising students with the Strang Print Room, and there was no additional financial cost, we hoped the activity would be sustainable. The activity has proven a good model for other HE teachers designing

new skills-based coursework. Andrea's aim (in conjunction with UCL Media Services and LTSS) of providing UCL's art collections as a resource for first-hand study to students across the disciplines and engaging them via digital platforms in order to develop key skills associated with visual analysis, critical thinking and archival research has obvious resonance for current and next generation learners. An example is a module currently being run with UCL's Geography Department whereby 2nd year students create 'digital dialogues' using UCL's art collections as a means of improving research skills and reflecting upon the process. Similar activities have been run with the Slade School of Art and are under development with UCL Language Center.

Further Information

The students' work can be viewed at http://www.flickr.com. There were four groups, with the following usernames and passwords:
Group 1
username: ic_gallery
password: imperial
Group 2
username: artexhibition
password: Weloveart
Group 3
wusername: tan.artc20
password: beatrice
Group 4
username: group4.artc20
password: energy