

The thing is . . . : a new model for encouraging diverse opinions in museum outreach

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What happens when a museum takes one single object out into a public space in order to generate a range of conversations over which the museum aims to have as little control as possible? UCL Museums commissioned a portable kiosk in which to host conversations about a single object, at a variety of locations where a wide range of people congregate, with the aim of engaging people in subjects that are potentially challenging or contentious. This article interrogates the initial uses of this new system, addressing problematic issues around the facilitator's role in hosting discussions where opinions differ and questioning how far a museum should go to encourage engagement with difficult topics. Drawing on theories and techniques for facilitating dialogue and debate, in this article the methods employed in this work are laid open to discussion, and the article incorporates a range of views from participants, facilitators and museum staff.

Keywords: museum outreach; public engagement; communication; object handling; museum conversations; debate

Introduction

In a school hall, a table is set up with 10 mysterious objects on it, neatly arranged on a cloth. Behind the table stands a smiling person and a sign saying 'Museums'. Children and adults approach the table and lightly touch one of the objects. They ask the person on the other side of the table, what is it? The museum staff do not answer straight away but ask in turn, what do you think it is? The children and the adults might have a conversation between themselves about what kind of object this is, an animal or a man-made thing. The museum staff offer suggestions for further questions, such as, what is it made of? How old do you think it is? What kind of animal is it? The children and adults give the answers they know, happy if they can deduce that it is, for example, a dog's skull, or they ask to be told by the staff, and they move on to other objects on the table.

This mode of engagement is used to encourage visitors to think for themselves, to explore and discuss the objects, while enjoying a tactile experience of objects that they could not have when viewing an exhibition in a museum. This kind of object handling experience has taken place thousands of times with objects from UCL Museums over the last decade, with audiences of families, children in schools, adults in community groups or in the museums themselves. We have received positive

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feedback from our visitors and have been satisfied with this kind of engagement, which is a classic mode of museum object handling commonly adopted in museums all over Britain.

Object handling, with explicit learning outcomes, is frequently part of formal and informal museum learning activities. Exhibitions are also normally designed with specific learning outcomes, which impose a discipline on their themes and subtexts. Within the context of increasing public participation in many areas of UK society – such as health policy, natural heritage and in the cultural sector broadly – we in UCL Museums began asking ourselves how we could improve on established techniques of engaging visitors, moving away from didactic mode towards dialogue. As a university museum service, our exploration was influenced by the increased emphasis on public engagement by universities; in 2007, UCL became one of six national beacons for public engagement¹. If, as sociologist George Herbert Mead stated, ‘the most human and humanizing activity that people can engage in [is] talking to each other’ (quoted in Griffin 2003, 56), then what could UCL Museums do to improve our activities in this fundamental area? As university museums we operate within an academic environment where debate is part of the learning experience for students – in what ways could we work with this form of discourse to encourage deeper public engagement with collections?

In 2009, UCL Museums commissioned artist Joshua Sofaer to run a public engagement project called Object Retrieval. A red London bus was parked in the university’s main quadrangle for a week, open 24 hours a day; inside the bus was one object from the museum collections and host *provocateurs*. Visitors became involved in myriad conversations that had the object as starting point, within the unusual and playful frame created by the bus.²

The success of this project inspired museum staff to experiment further with the concept of foregrounding conversation, based around a single object rather than an array, with the idea that the object could be a conversation piece, the opening to fruitful discussion, dialogue or debate. We also considered how – without a bus – we might frame these conversations, creating a special physical space, outside the museum, that could be part of the experience.

In my role as Head of Learning and Access, which involves working with all of the collections at UCL, I took forward these ideas. I asked myself, how could my colleagues and I facilitate more meaningful forms of public engagement, particularly outside the museums? Could we engage people with big ideas through one object, going beyond an exploration of the object and its history into discussions of issues relevant to contemporary society, such as identity, and the role of history or science? Could we successfully host debates where participants would express diverse opinions? As part of this process, I had to address issues related to my role. This would mean presenting a new face to the public, as a facilitator of discussions and engagement rather than as a museum professional or expert. It would mean coming out from behind the table.

What skills did I have and what did I need to learn in order to host conversations that would provide meaningful experiences for people? Are museum staff truly well-placed to host discussions about challenging, contentious and potentially emotional topics with people and what are the limits to what can be accomplished? I wondered whether anyone could be trained to do this kind of work, or whether the requirements for self-awareness and emotional presence might prove too challenging.

I also wondered what participants would think of this kind of engagement experience.

The resulting project is an outreach model called *The thing is . . .*. The aims of the work are evolving but I started with two broad ones:

- The experience should be thought-provoking.
- The outreach model should be attractive; that is, it should draw people to interact with it and encourage deeper engagement.

The three elements of the new model are:

- the use of a single object rather than a small collection;
- a special space in which conversations take place;
- raising questions about societal issues and facilitating discussions about them.

In this article, I aim to describe in detail how this work has developed, exploring many of the concerns and conflicting feelings I have had about this form of engagement, alongside the experiences that I, and other facilitators, have had so far. I have been influenced by strands of communication theory as well as by the work of others in the museum sector, and I have drawn on the comments of participants and peers. Therefore, in keeping with the spirit of group discussion that is at the heart of this work, this article includes multiple voices: other facilitators in the project (most of whom were students or graduates of the university); a range of public visitors; museum professionals in the learning field³ and staff at UCL Museums⁴. Quotations are anonymous and are referenced as follows: (museum professional); (visitor); (facilitator), (UCL Museums staff).

Context and influences

Sociologist Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism proposes that:

Objects may exist in physical form, but for the human being, they are pointed out, isolated, catalogued, interpreted, and given meaning through social interaction. In the symbolic interactionist perspective, we say that objects for the human being are really *social objects* (Charon 2001, 44).

Creating places where objects and people meet, where people interact around and in response to objects, have conversations about them, can be seen through a symbolic interactionist perspective as working with the essential matter of how people relate to the world and create the reality in which they live. Interactions with objects occur all the time in museums, where conversations happen between visitors, who frequently visit in social groups. Research into the kinds of conversations visitors have with each other, in different groupings, and how their conversations relate to their background, their experience, and the content or design of an exhibition demonstrates that people learn in many ways in this scenario (Leinhardt, Crowley, and Knutson 2002).

This research has focused on visitors to exhibitions, where visitor conversation is unplanned and incidental. With *The thing is . . .*, the conversation *is* the experience,

offering an opportunity for the public to engage with museum staff in a direct and intimate way. Facilitators in *The thing is...* do provide information and ask specific questions, both forms of interpretation that could be delivered without a person present, via text panels or through digital media. But they also respond to whatever visitors say, offer their own thoughts or views, providing lone visitors or groups the opportunity to discuss their thoughts with someone from the museum. They encourage people to discuss important topics and to clarify their views.

Through this work, UCL Museums is moving from simply provoking guessing games in an education–entertainment model to starting conversations about contentious topics and challenging subjects. Fiona Cameron has written powerfully about the potential role for museums that do this:

Engaging controversial topics and controversy is now a fundamental role for many museums in an increasingly complex and globalising world. Controversy is no longer something to be feared, but signals the contemporary relevance of the museum form in public political culture...I argue that museums have a critical role in activating controversy as a productive means for engaging their audiences; in formulating new knowledge; in contributing meaningfully to current debates to more effectively operate within an increasingly pluralistic society and as spaces operating within new transitional risk management and decision-making flows on matters of societal concern (Cameron 2010, 53).

Cameron's research also suggests that audiences see the museum as an institution that has the power to challenge their way of thinking (Cameron 2005). She argues that museums should not shy away from difficult subjects and from people's responses to them.

Bernadette Lynch is another theorist/practitioner who has written about the need to move beyond invited participation to engaging with conflict, to hosting debates where the facilitator creates a safe space for different views to be expressed. Her research into engagement and participation in museums discerns that 'consensus is not the aim; rather projects may generate "dissensus" – multiple and contested perspectives that invite participants and visitors into further dialogue' (Lynch and Alberti 2010, 16). This approach is necessary to avoid 'empowerment-lite' experienced by participants in some museum engagement work.

Museum staff need values and processes to inform this kind of work. Janes and Conaty propose four values that may signal social responsibility in museums: idealism, intimacy, depth and interconnectedness (Janes and Conaty 2005, 8–9). If museum practice is grounded in these values, contentious topics can be raised without slipping into simple provocation, leading to genuine appreciation of the museum by the public as a space of diverse views. I would argue that the combination of special space, focus on one object and discussion of potentially contentious topics provides a way of working with these values. Certainly, I have been influenced by them as this work has developed.

Janes considers the concept of a 'dialogue centre' (Janes 2009, 83) as one way to frame purposeful conversations between people; somewhere that is 'a tangible focus for visitor interaction' (Janes 2009, 83). This is a place for more meaningful engagement between museums and visitors because 'it is highly unlikely that public space in museums, no matter how monumental it is... will ever produce much more than admiration and fatigue' (Janes 2009, 83). *The thing is...* is a kind of dialogue

centre, placed in the public sphere outside the museum, and I aim to create an experience that is an antidote to such ‘museum fatigue’. The ‘emphasis is placed on experience and process’, as Jennifer Barrett describes the work of the ‘post-museum’ (Barrett 2011, 109), the museum working in ways that are relevant to contemporary society, again something that UCL Museums aims to do.

Barrett also argues for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the terms ‘public’ and ‘community’ as they relate to museums: ‘the expectations museums create by using the term [public] in a non-specific way are not tenable; nor are they met by exchanging the word with community’ (Barrett 2011, 170). She argues for embracing the complexities of these terms, and for moving away from a modernist concern with ‘public participation’ without succumbing to ‘romantic notions of “community”’ (Barrett 2011, 111). I interpret her examination of these terms to mean that engagement needs to occur at a very personal level, moving beyond the categorisation of even ‘community’ participation to the form of intimate discussion such as that explored in *The thing is . . .*

These discussions have been influenced by another strand of sociology: the theory of coordinated management of meaning. This theory asserts that ‘persons in conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create’ (Griffin 2003, 66). In practice, coordinated management of meaning has been used to ‘create circumstances in which people in the community who disagreed with . . . each other could communicate safely’ (Griffin 2003, 69). Facilitators in such work are trained to

(1) frame the forum as a special event in which unusual forms of communication would occur, (2) remain neutral by actively aligning oneself with all the participants, (3) help people tell their own stories by expressing curiosity and asking questions, (4) enable people to tell even better stories through appreciative reframing and the weaving together of diverse stories, and (5) provide ‘in-the-moment’ coaching and interventions. (Griffin 2003, 69)

People working with this framework in communities where there are diverse views on issues such as racial integration have found that hosting forums where they use this approach has yielded very positive benefits, with participants developing insight and acceptance that there are diverse views among groups of people. I have been influenced by this model when reflecting on the development of *The thing is . . .*

The process of developing a new model for engagement⁵

Using (only) one object and an introduction to issues of facilitation

I began by trying out the use of a single object in outreach, as a starting point for group discussion. This involved a shift away from my previous practice, which aimed at having a group learn about a set of objects and their context (for example, a topic such as life in ancient Egypt). I tested this in outreach work in school spaces before we developed a dedicated space in which to host these discussions.

I used a shabti (see Figure 1) – a figurine representing a servant that was one of many customarily buried with the dead in ancient Egypt – from the collection at UCL’s Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology. I took this to six groups of adults in



Figure 1. Shabti, Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology.

the London Borough of Haringey, working in partnership with staff from the local authority during Black History Month 2010.

I learned from running these workshops that groups could have the kind of issues-focused discussion I aimed for, and that I could encourage debate and practise holding different viewpoints within a group. Here, I outline some of the differences in how I worked with these groups compared to past outreach work involving object handling. Reflecting on these early workshops, I discovered my own biases and suppositions about people's expectations.

As facilitator I found that I presented the object differently than when I introduced past outreach sessions in a similar setting; I talked about it more before revealing it. I felt that this additional scene-setting was important as, in contrast to past outreach sessions, we would not be considering a group of objects and building a cumulative picture. I posed questions to the group about the broad subject before showing them the object. With hindsight, I wonder whether this was as straightforward as it seemed: was I warming up the group for conversations to follow, or was I demonstrating an unacknowledged concern I had that the group would find seeing only one object disappointing and did I want to fill a supposed gap with introductory information and talk?

In past work, I focused on object handling, taking for granted that everyone would want to touch museum objects when given the opportunity. In attempting a new way of working, I removed that assumption, being explicit that people could handle the object, or not, as they wished. I was surprised to find that not everyone wanted to. Was this because, in previous workshops, participants – viewing me as the representative of the museum, perhaps a figure of authority – acted in response to my instructions as they perceived them? When I aimed to align myself more closely with participants and frame the conversation in a more open and questioning way, following the framework for communication outlined in coordinated management of meaning theory, participants felt comfortable with asserting their personal preferences.

I was explicit about intentions when opening discussions that followed the viewing and handling of the object. I stated that, in the museum, we are thinking

about particular questions and that I would be interested to hear what people thought. People spoke if they wanted to, and I assured them that there were no right or wrong answers to these questions. When I made comments, these were often my own views and thoughts as they occurred during the discussion, and I reflected back what people said. Again this aligns with the coordinated management of meaning framework, in which facilitators aim to ‘help people tell their own stories by expressing curiosity’ (Griffin 2003, 69).

I aimed to remain open and confident and to follow the group discussion, not to lead it. At times this felt uncomfortable for me as the facilitator, because I had little idea where the conversation would go and because, unlike in my previous outreach work, I was not working to an agenda. It was exciting and rewarding, but frequently a challenge, to *not* lead.

Using a single object I discovered that participants could focus on the object, then move on to larger issues connected to it and discuss these, rather than moving their focus around a group of objects. I hoped to move towards dissensus but wondered if the workshops would facilitate debate in which participants openly disagreed with one another. I had one experience of this in these trial sessions: an argument between two people among 16, and managing this situation was a challenge for me. The two people arguing were taking the focus of the session away from the museum object and away from any group discussion. Some of the group lost attention and left soon after. However, the two people were arguing over how best history should be taught to children, touching on issues of teacher and parent responsibility, dissecting the purpose and value of Black History Month, debating how multiple histories could be included in the mainstream; all important, dynamic issues for those parents present to hear their peers discuss. My approach was to continue to hold the space with neutral body language and not to interject and, where relevant, to say to people, ‘This is the limit of what I know’. I learnt to feel comfortable saying, ‘I’m not sure what I think about this myself’. This is similar to aspects of the facilitator’s role as described in the coordinated management of meaning framework: remaining as neutral as possible and providing appropriate interventions (Griffin 2003). However, I did want to guide conversation back to the museum object the group had been considering, to move on from the argument.

I was prompted to consider the extent to which it is possible for a facilitator from a museum not to lead conversation in these groups. In some situations, I felt I was not leading, when in practice I was still guiding discussions to areas that I thought *should* be covered, or that *I* thought were interesting, or would be interesting to the group. It could be argued that the group followed my lead and participated through an unconscious mode of behaviour in which people want to please a perceived figure of authority, conform and do the right thing in a group situation. This behaviour is described as part of symbolic interactionism, where people habitually act in accordance with their perception of others’ desires or intentions, often with the unconscious aim of acting towards a social norm (Charon 2001, 153). This strand of communication theory has informed my understanding of some of the subtext of participants’ behaviour. Through these early sessions, I learnt that facilitators need self-awareness and training if they are to truly participate and not lead discussions and to encourage participants to express diverse views.

A note on training for facilitating discussions

We, UCL Museums staff, undertook training as part of developing our skills in engagement, and we worked with a professional mediator. Central tenets of mediation are the need for the mediator to absent themselves from the discussion, to be as neutral as possible and not to provide any information that could influence or be seen to lead discussion. Alongside these is a need to be self-aware and to be emotionally present to all parties, so that they in turn can express themselves. During the training, museum staff raised the issue that, for us, there is a need to impart some information about objects. We cannot behave as though everything is subjective: a wallaby is not a kangaroo. The professional mediator questioned the need to hold on to the discussion even at this level, arguing that it is not possible to be a true facilitator if one is in charge of giving information. Museum staff felt that giving information alongside facilitation is precisely what we need to accomplish in engagement work; however finely balanced the task, this is what we must strive to do. Whilst it is always useful to explore parallel practice, when we are experimenting with new ways of working, we need to have the confidence to create our own model.

A space for conversation

One of the three main components of *The thing is . . .* is the creation of a special place for conversations. As in the coordinated management of meaning framework, I wanted to frame engagements as a special event; I later related the creation of a special space to the concept of dialogue centre (Janes 2009). The space in which conversations take place sets the tone from the moment visitors encounter it and I wanted it to make an impact, inspire curiosity in the visitor and a sense of anticipation. I wanted an immersive environment in order to draw visitors' focus from their immediate surroundings, to transition to a state of focused conversation.

The thing is . . . was always intended as an outreach model, to engage a broader spectrum of people than those who visit UCL Museums. The outreach pod (as I came to call it) was intended as an experimental space distinctly different from our museum spaces. It has been noted that, 'in terms of museums research, the notion of the psychological influence, or the affect, of a physical space remains an unexplored issue' yet there are of course noticeable effects on participants (Knutson 2002, 31). On a practical level, it needed to be something that could be easily transported and be operated by two members of staff.

The thing is . . . is in the form of a huge cardboard crate (see Figure 2), with echoes of museum or archaeological packaging, with a contrasting interior and experience⁶. The interior walls and ceiling are covered in mirrors to create a sense of infinite space, overcoming the potential sense of confinement (see Figure 3). More importantly, the mirrors create the feeling of an imagined place, a hyper-real space with multiple reflections receding to infinite points, speckled with the glittery lights of many tiny LEDs that are placed in a grid pattern on the walls of the box. This is a typical reaction on experiencing it for the first time: 'I love the tardis-like quality, like a building site portacabin on the outside but a magic mirrored interior inside. Wonderful' (museum professional).



Figure 2. The thing is... exterior.

The design has been very well received by visitors so far, and for the great majority of people it works to establish a special atmosphere that in turn affects their engagement with the object and the facilitator. Future research could involve coding participants' comments for themes that reflect the effect of the space on engagement. At this early stage, all facilitators have observed that the space has indeed served to shift people's focus from their immediate environment. They come in and are wowed by the mirrors, the sense of infinite space and of something *disco* or fairytale that is created by the combination of mirrors and lights. Visitors have commented on the



Figure 3. The thing is... interior.

‘fab building’, that they ‘loved the immersive nature of the experience and the *flat-pack* nature of the construction’, and one of the facilitators noted

It should not be forgotten that, although much interest was directed at the museum object, the design of the box caused a great stir. Outside, many people appreciated the eco-friendly composition and attractive design. Both visitors and passers-by were constantly asking who had created the box, whilst taking photographs both inside and out (facilitator).

Moreover:

the space is intriguing, intimate without being confined and the reflective surfaces show the object “mise-en-abyme” which could perhaps be seen as a metaphor for the infinite reflections on the meaning of an object (facilitator).

The co-ordinated management of meaning theory refers to framing conversations that hold diverse views as special events and this space acts in this way. The space also works in conjunction with the experience of looking at one object to affect the visitor experience:

All visitors appeared to feel comfortable, while focusing on the object and being inside the box. Most people said that they really appreciated the experience and thought that focusing on one object in a tranquil space was a great idea. They commented that it is easy to become overwhelmed by the number of objects and information inside a museum, and that the box provided a welcome companion to the museum experience (facilitator).

A theme in visitor comments was that ‘it’s great to focus on one object rather than be overwhelmed by loads in a “normal” museum’; something that had emerged in my initial workshops with a single object but was enhanced when I used the new dialogue centre.

Conversations, discussions and debates: facilitation and participation

‘What is important in life? Today, it’s your bank balance, the stock market; then, it was making and wearing a beautiful thing’.

This simple, profound statement was made by a German man during a visit to *The thing is...* at the Bloomsbury Festival 2011. It was part of a discussion he initiated, sparked by looking at the object in the box that day, a 3300-year-old carnelian necklace from the Petrie Palestine collection in UCL’s Institute of Archaeology (see Figure 4). It is part of a longer statement he made about the meaning of life and humans’ relationship with material things, money and status. He articulated the view that a simpler life – the kind of life he perceived to be connected to the necklace – is a better life. This was one of a number of emotive conversations that took place at that event, where people shared their thoughts, opinions and stories. Other examples of visitors’ responses to the same object included:

I feel uncomfortable with it having been taken from a dead person and not knowing where their remains are.



Figure 4. Carnelian necklace, UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections.

Sad that the necklace symbolised something from a lost culture and we don't know anything about family members.
There is always a bit of us in our representation of the other.

Visitors became involved in diverse discussions, such as the prevalence of racism in the past and the cruelty they saw reflected in the archaeological material; one visitor said that it was 'terrible what you could do back then, just awful'.

Many of these discussions were in line with values of idealism, intimacy, depth and interconnectedness (Janes and Conaty 2005). The broad themes of discussions were

- narrative/storytelling: participants recounted a story from their own experience or one they had heard, as part of the conversation (see Figure 5);



Figure 5. Participant in discussion.

- questioning: the visitor asked several or a lot of questions about the object or the issues raised;
- processing: people made statements that frequently illustrated their thought processes within the conversation, for example, ‘there has been a shift in my thinking about taxidermy. I’m not sure in which direction’ (visitor).

Participants also commented as follows: ‘When I first read the question I think one thing, then I think something else as we talk about it’; ‘[We] discussed something I wouldn’t normally engage with’, and ‘[the experience was] thought-provoking, bringing up something I still don’t completely have an opinion on but will try to learn more’ (visitors). These examples indicate that *The thing is...* works in accordance with coordinated management of meaning theory, enabling participants to tell stories through appreciative reframing and the weaving together of diverse views (Griffin 2003).

How did facilitators manage discussions where people participated and responded like this? Following on from the trial workshops, outlined above, facilitators were exceptionally well-informed about the object to be used. They were able to answer more questions about it and more in-depth questions about it and its multiple contexts than they would have been during past outreach work. As facilitators we considered in advance what *our* answers to potential questions were, both as representatives of UCL Museums and simply as ourselves. As a result, visitors commented that, ‘It’s nice to have constructive discussion involving current



Figure 6. Facilitator in *The thing is...*



Figure 7. Using the question cards.

issues, in a historical context’, and that, ‘Every exhibit in a museum ought to have someone to converse with’ (visitors).

Facilitators were polite and welcoming, and explicit about intentions.⁷ A short introduction about the object was given, and then facilitators asked participants’ permission to ask them questions, framing the discussion as optional and interactive from the start. Figure 6 is an example of facilitators’ dynamic conversational style.

We followed the introduction by presenting visitors with a hand of playing cards, face down, and asking them to pick a card, as shown in Figure 7. Visitors were often amused by this and showed enthusiasm, excitement and enjoyment. On the cards were questions that acted as conversation starters. I chose this method of introducing questions/concepts as I felt it was a non-threatening and simple way of opening discussion. It would have felt uncomfortable directly asking people questions about their opinions on grave goods, child labour, animal testing or similarly contentious subjects. This way of framing discussion will no doubt evolve with future uses of *The thing is . . .*

Facilitators have been awed by people’s enthusiasm and openness to engage:

It was great to get different perspectives on a theme as each person brought their own background and stories to their interpretation of the object, highlighting the subjective nature of museum interpretations. I think this is something that all museums should be interested in doing as the view of curators having access to objective knowledge and an absolute truth can no longer be supported and it is great to have multiple voices in a museum interpretation that encourage debate and critical thinking. (facilitator)

In *The thing is . . .*, facilitators bring more of themselves to the discussion than in past practice because they are engaging in dialogue; and to help conversation flow, they need to be comfortable voicing their own opinions. There is something special about being fully emotionally present in a discussion; it is possible to have amazing, dynamic conversations with people with a museum object as the starting point. Visitors have been eager to share their thoughts about complex world issues – such as the existence of nation states being detrimental to the good of humanity – and personal issues, such as incidents in their childhood. ‘A passionate style . . . can generate the energy to sustain harder thinking about issues’ (Gambetta 1998, 20).

People want to talk, often passionately, and when museums act well, we may be better placed than many other organisations to facilitate meaningful discussions.

The development of discussion skills is one potential result of experiences in *The thing is . . .* One of the facilitators noted: ‘Through a process of deduction and deep thinking, many people had their confidence raised as they came up with the answers to a lot of their own questions’. Such skills development is an aspect of encouraging people to engage in ‘dissensus’. In reflecting on our experiences with *The thing is . . .*, I asked facilitators if there were situations where, in order to directly facilitate such discussion or debate, or encourage a range of responses, we asked participants: does anyone have a different opinion? Facilitators have not explicitly done this but they have experienced participants debating with them, or voicing different views to each other, although very politely and not in ways that led to ongoing discussion. While facilitators want and need to show sensitivity to people’s views, the question arises as to how a facilitator should respond if faced with more extreme (e.g., racist) comments? Should we say we do not agree? Should we remain neutral? Should we move conversation in a different direction? I have yet to find a way to frame a response that I would be happy to recommend in training other facilitators. This is clearly a point for future development. The coordinated management of meaning model foregrounds the neutrality of facilitators. Yet, because facilitators need to give information about museum objects, we are automatically perceived as having some authority, despite behaving in as egalitarian a way as possible.

Facilitators, at this stage in the work, remain concerned about what the consequences might be of purposely initiating debate, of seeking ‘dissensus’ and of their ability to hold the space in which a potentially heated discussion takes place. There are concerns about how best to bring any heated discussion to a close, for example:

Collections in the UK are often the product of dark histories of empire and exploitation, but they can be enlightening of these histories. I think where objects represent layers of controversy, the best thing to do is to use them to explore these issues. Otherwise, it could be argued that we in institutions (which hold knowledge, the means of knowledge production, and the means of disseminating knowledge) are deciding for the rest of the population what topics are suitable for public consumption. It is difficult for us to adjust the balance of power in this regard completely, but I think work on public engagement can break down some of those barriers. (UCL Museums staff)

I wonder whether engagement through *The thing is . . .* can help people to break through to a more common understanding and to learn about others’ points of view, and whether this should be a future aim of our work and if so, should it be explicit? I also wonder whether potential visitors would find that off-putting.

I have questions also about where thought-provoking shades into simply provoking. I feel I need always to take care that I am not ‘bear-baiting’, as one of my peers put it. It may be argued that the outcomes for participants are an increased interest in contemporary issues and an opportunity to practise expressing their views, but does this justify running the risk that some participants may find the experience invasive or uncomfortable? Facilitators need to remain sensitive at all times to participants’ responses, and we need to ensure that they are trained to be comfortable holding the space for others.

Another possible outcome of this kind of engagement is a change in people's relationship with museums. When we engage the public in discussions through outreach work:

People find it interesting, rewarding, surprising and valuable. Our remit is not only to remind people about the existence of our museum service and sites but also to (hopefully) encourage people to think again about the value of their museum and the work of museums, perhaps enough to either visit or engage with cultural history. (museum professional)

Engagement outside the museum is always a form of advertising; if truly meaningful, it can promote the *value* of cultural heritage as well. Another result of engagement through discussions may be:

creating more 'conversations' between the public and museum – to assist in informing and creating displays/exhibitions that really 'mean' something to people. Ideas and interpretation will come out that would perhaps never have been contemplated by museum staff (which are always subjective to personal and prior experience/learning) The more people feel they can contribute to the work of museums, the more they will access and feel comfortable, wanting to come back time and again. (museum professional)

This kind of reciprocal relationship is potentially very rewarding for everyone involved – certainly for museum staff – and something to aspire to when using dialogue and debate as a mode of engagement.

Conclusions and ways forward

A number of visitors to *The thing is...* have mentioned, unprompted, that the experience was 'thought-provoking': one of the two aims outlined at the start of the project. Visitors and facilitators have commented that the conversations they have had in the box have been in-depth discussions about a variety of topics, with a museum object as the starting point for sharing thoughts, reflecting on personal experiences and questioning what is important in life, or how to live a meaningful, 'good' life. *The thing is...* experience offers an opportunity for people to interact with museums in a way that is intimate, and can demonstrate how aspects of human life interconnect, and it gives them the chance to talk through ideas and form opinions. The experience can also gently challenge people's opinions and ask them to view things differently or perhaps accept that there are diverse points of view about many contemporary issues; as proposed in the coordinated management of meaning framework (Griffin 2003). In *The thing is...* model of engagement, museum staff act as facilitators to co-create with participants an encounter with a museum object that has intimacy, depth and interconnectedness (Janes and Conaty 2005, 8–9); values that have come to influence the project as it develops. There remain issues around how museum staff balance their role as holders of information with the new role of facilitator, encouraging diverse views and debate, including around contentious topics.

In reflecting on this work, I have also found the theory and practice of deliberative democracy helpful in thinking about conversation. Deliberative democracy has moved from the purely political sphere to being applied to many areas of public policy in the

United Kingdom, especially natural heritage and planning. If I want to move beyond hosting conversations to facilitating deliberative discussions, in which participants gain insight and possibly confidence and skills in talking about opinions in a public group setting, this theory provides a useful definition:

Generally speaking, we can say that deliberation is debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants. (Chambers 2003, 309)

‘Deliberative spaces are considered to be an ideal kind of social environment – namely, one where citizens can discuss and debate common concerns, access a wide range of information, and reflect and revise their understanding of issues’ (Parkins and Mitchell 2005). There is potential use for museum objects, in combination with a specially designed space, to achieve the same kind of discussions. What is the museum facilitator’s primary role here: to listen, to talk, to challenge or all of these? How is it best to do this while acting as a representative of a museum? Should I try harder to accomplish genuine debate?

It remains to be seen whether this model is a better way of engaging the public in debate about contentious topics than other museum experiences, such as exhibitions, museum interactives or more traditional forms of museum outreach. Yet, as the museum professionals and facilitators I spoke to insisted, museums surely need to move beyond presentation of ‘dead relics’ and face-to-face conversations are a vital tool for doing this. *The thing is . . .*, with its combination of special space, a single object and the raising of specific, potentially contentious topics, has so far proved to be a promising new model for a new kind of museum dialogue centre.

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Notes

1. ‘The six beacons are university-based collaborative centres that are working to support, recognise, reward and build capacity for public engagement. The beacons are at the forefront of efforts to change the culture in universities, assisting staff and students to engage with the public’. www.publicengagement.ac.uk
2. For details, see www.ucl.ac.uk/public-engagement/contemporary/objectretrieval
3. Contacted through the Group for Education in Museums www.gem.org.uk
4. I posed questions to museum professionals, by email, and received written answers by email. Immediately after interactions in the space as facilitator, I took detailed notes of conversations. I asked facilitators to reflect on their experiences immediately after working and to write notes. I convened debrief meetings with facilitators and took detailed notes of their comments. I kept a journal for the first year and a half of the project, recording my experiences in conversation with designers and curators and other colleagues as I worked towards the final design of the space and choice of objects to use with it; I also recorded my feelings about issues, practical and philosophical, that arose during this process and have drawn on this journal in writing this article.

5. Each of the three components of the project – using a single object, using a dedicated space outside the museum and focusing on conversations – is discussed here in a dedicated section. However, in practice these elements have worked together to create the experience for participants, hence there is some unavoidable overlap in discussing them.
6. The designers were Mobile Studio, a boutique design organisation who have completed projects that include gallery displays and small interiors. Their byline is ‘art, architecture and everything in between’, apt for creating our space for engagement, and their practice ‘places a strong emphasis on collaborative working and public engagement’ (www.themobilestudio.co.uk).
7. The introductory statement is ‘We at UCL Museums have created this space because we wanted somewhere where people can focus on one of our objects and have a conversation about it, we wanted a special place, something out of the ordinary’.

Notes on contributor

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