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Public arts as extra-curricular learning: A research based investigation into the potential of a contemporary art gallery to enhance the student learning experience

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Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme - final report

Public arts as extra-curricular learning

A research based investigation into the potential of a contemporary art gallery to enhance the student learning experience

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Project context –

This report summarises a Plymouth University -based research project which investigated in what ways the university contemporary arts gallery (Peninsula Arts) could potentially enhance the student learning experience. There is growing interest across the sector about the ways in which extra-curricular and campus-based learning opportunities are useful vehicles for students' holistic educational development (Hopkinson et al. 2008; NASPA and ACPA 2004). This runs parallel to a developing understanding of the cultural and cognitive benefits of interaction with contemporary art, which purportedly include the encouragement of disciplinary and interdisciplinary understanding and improved meta-cognitive skills (Creative B 2010; Falk 2006). However, to date there is no work which consciously draws together these two areas and investigates the impacts of contemporary art on the student learning experience. This project addressed this effective gap by developing critical understandings of how students' experience the gallery using Falk and Dierkings' (2005) 'contextual model of learning' to encapsulate the determinants of constructivist learning within the free-choice learning environment of a gallery. This report provides a brief overview of our findings and presents recommendations for how links can be forged between curator and curriculum to engage students in the gallery and in contemporary art.

Methods used –

The research sought to:

- Develop critical understanding of the ways in which students' engage in contemporary art at Peninsula Arts;
- Explore the ways in which the contemporary art gallery can be used to create links to formal curricula.

The research focused on a case study of a single exhibition, 'The Tamar Project: Ghost' by Adam Chodzko that ran in January 2013. The artwork 'Ghost' is a 22-foot kayak, a unique hand crafted wooden boat which was designed as a participatory experience, inviting members of the public on a journey down the River Tamar in Devon, UK. The research strategy was as follows.

- 50 undergraduate students were recruited via email
- Students were placed in interdisciplinary groups of 5
- Groups attended the exhibition for one hour
- Students then filled in a questionnaire about their experience and immediately took part in a one hour long focus group to discuss this in greater depth
- A small sample of faculty (n=4) took part in semi-structured interviews about the exhibition and possible links between contemporary art and curriculum
- Analysis of the questionnaires took place in survey monkey
- Analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken in N-Vivo

Results –

The results suggest that in terms of engagement with the gallery space and contemporary art there were low levels of intrinsic motivation to attend exhibitions. The majority of students had little previous experience of contemporary arts and therefore had little underlying schema with which to structure the experience. They were unsure how to interpret the work and were intimidated by the gallery space and the lack of signposting about the purpose and form of exhibits. However, the time spent in the gallery and subsequent focus group discussion developed confidence and schematics with which to structure the experience. Student made sense of the exhibit by linking it to personal experiences although these varied. When encouraged in the focus groups students were able to make articulate links to their discipline and demonstrated that discussing the exhibit was a useful cognitive and discursive exercise. 85% post event reported extended knowledge of contemporary art and many students returned to the gallery. This suggests a rationale for more formalised links to the curriculum by creating fertile conditions for learning; relevance, time, group discussion and appropriate scaffolding. The contributions that faculty made echoed these findings and suggestions were made for how such links might be made.

Recommendations from this work include the following:

- Embed the Peninsula Arts gallery and wider programme in the whole learning experience through formal and extra-curricular activities

- Create links between the practice of curating and the curriculum by:
 - Engaging Faculty in developing disciplinary learning opportunities
 - Develop curatorial strategies/signposting that encourage links
 - Developing a Peninsula Arts Plymouth Plus module
 - Directing students to informal learning opportunities through the Plymouth Award

Dissemination –

Winter J and Chapman S (2013) 'Public Arts as extra-curricular learning' Vice Chancellor's Conference on Teaching and learning. Plymouth University, UK 28/06/2013 - 28/06/2013

Winter J & Chapman S (2013) 'Public Arts as Extra Curricular Learning' The 8th International Conference on the Arts in Society. Budapest, Hungary 24/06/2013 - 26/06/2013

A paper is currently in process and should be ready for peer review publication early in 2014.

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