

University museums and the community

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Abstract

This paper summarises the main themes of the UMAC 2008 conference, noting some of the challenges and opportunities facing university museums at the start of the 21st century.

The idea for this conference grew from a recognition of the increasingly important role that university museums now play in engaging with a wide range of communities. For much of their history, universities were elite learning environments, often deliberately exclusive to all but staff and students. Over the last fifty years or so, their focus has shifted somewhat and universities have been playing an increasingly important role in their local and regional communities. University strategies increasingly acknowledge their wider economic, social and cultural roles: most are major employers; many play a significant role in the economy through knowledge transfer or their contribution to tourism.

In addition, one of the major ways in which universities make a contribution to their communities is through their cultural provision. Many universities operate theatres, concert venues, parks, botanic gardens, observatories, museums and galleries. Increasingly, university museums and galleries have become a vital link between universities and their communities. They are important sources of learning outside the classroom for schools and colleges, as well as places of informal learning for visitors of all kinds; they are vehicles for public engagement with academic research; and increasingly they are becoming places where the university can listen to the community and its views on the issues studied by academics.

The conference therefore addressed one of the most pressing issues today for university museums; how they can best function as places of interaction between the many communities they now serve, both internally and externally. Internal communities will include staff and students at work and at leisure. External communities will vary for each museum but are likely to include teachers and schoolchildren, families, adult learners, communities of origin and 'virtual' communities online.

One major area of discussion throughout the conference concerned the difficulty of prioritizing audiences. Many universities have yet to formally identify their key target audiences, leaving university museums to define their own, at risk of operating both unstrategically and unsustainably. As audience research conducted at Yale (PICKERING) demonstrates, potential audiences for the museum may well be deterred by the physical and psychological barriers presented by the university as a whole: aligning audience development initiatives with wider university priorities is critical. Working this strategic thinking into day-to-day activity can also be a challenge; many university museums struggle to find a balance between time spent with 'traditional' academic communities supporting teaching and research, and time spent serving new external audiences. At Dartmouth College's Hood Museum, all staff were involved in trying to establish what this balance would mean for them, and all are involved in ongoing evaluation of whether or not it is working (BIANCO).

When thinking about academic communities, most university museums – with their roots in subject specialisms – tend to work most closely with staff and students from their own disciplines. Yet as universities champion cross-disciplinary working, university museums can no longer assume that all academic users will be subject specialists; or that all will be using the museum for research and teaching. Informal activities to build internal audiences can be most effective in challenging disciplinary barriers and in generating whole-institution support (ASHBY, HERUC).

Many university museums are now looking outwards and working with a wide spectrum of external communities, as the papers here demonstrate. Some of these communities – such as schools – were widely felt to be natural audiences and the conference provided many examples of innovative engagement with schools and families both on and offsite (LLOYD, MORAN, VAN DYKE, VERSHELDE). Other initiatives provoked considerable debate. Some delegates questioned whether it was appropriate for university museums to be working with ‘difficult’ audiences, such as the long-term unemployed, or those recovering from mental illness. There was heated discussion as to whether creationists were a community with which natural history museums should engage. Those working with excluded communities (Hart, West) argue that building relationships with such groups – often via community partners – is a vital means through which a university fulfils its wider social responsibilities, and justifies its public funding.

Across the world, university museums are playing an increasing role in civic and regional cultural and social strategies; the conference heard of examples in Bogota, Tartu and Sydney (CASTELL, MÄGI, ELLIS). In the UK, a number of universities have recently been designated as ‘Beacons of Public Engagement’ by the Higher Education Funding Council, giving them specific responsibilities for engaging with local and regional audiences. At the heart of this initiative lies the conviction that all universities have a duty to engage the public with what they do, and that such engagement should take the form of dialogue. Several of the papers here (ALLASON-JONES, CROSS, HAWKINS) address what such institutional commitment may mean for their university museums.

It is clear from these papers, and from the discussions around them, that university museums have immense potential to engage communities of all kinds. Their astonishingly rich collections attract lay and specialist visitors, open routes into school curricula, make trans-global connections. University museum spaces are often interesting liminal sites for academic-public interaction. And university museum staff not only possess collections expertise but are often far more skilled than their academic colleagues at setting up such interactions.

However, it has to be said that much of this potential is as yet unrealized. Despite our access to excellent IT support, cutting edge technology and computer science expertise, few university museums experiment with new technologies for interpretation; Tehran’s Gemstone Museum being a notable exception (MONZAVI). Most university museum websites are static and uni-directional, failing to provide opportunities for dialogue and debate, or to take advantage of the semantic Web (CARNALL, WEBER). Few of our university museums are located in purpose-built spaces with good public access where they can genuinely provide an academic-public interface. The inspiring example provided by the Trinity College Dublin’s Science Gallery (GORMAN), which truly illustrates the potential for an interdisciplinary public laboratory, is – it has to be said – unencumbered by collections; no university museum is yet running programs as dynamic and well attuned to current research and contemporary concerns. And as university museum staff we increasingly face new challenges, such as being asked to mediate contentious academic-public debates (SITCH). It may be that we need to review our collections, relocate our activities and re-develop our staff if our museums are to achieve their full potential for community engagement.

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