

Building creative communities: How does a university museum work with family learning in a challenging community context?

CELINE WEST

Abstract

UCL Museums and Collections have worked with parents and children in the London Borough of Haringey for the past 4 years. The successful partnership between the Collections' education officer and Haringey's parental involvement coordinator has led to a sustained program of outreach in the Borough, mainly with parents at family learning workshops in schools, and with parents and primary school children in schools, children's centers and play groups. Haringey is home to one of the most diverse populations in the UK, with a high proportion of recent immigrants as well as low levels of attainment at school, high levels of poverty and crime. Community cohesion is viewed as key to strategies for improvement; Haringey has been a leader in parental involvement in schools and in creative work with museums partnering schools for the past decade. This paper analyses the special impact a university museum can have in this context, with museum outreach used to engage parents not only in new subjects and their own creativity but also in understanding more of what and how their children learn and raising aspirations. Object handling workshops provide a forum for discussion with others in the community and often act as a starting point for people to tell their own stories for the first time.

Background

Parental involvement in children's learning has been recognized as a key element in their development. In the UK today it is seen to be something that public services can help parents to do, beyond the classroom.¹ University collections have the potential to help parents inspire their children about learning and their future education as well as giving them rewarding experiences with objects and museums that they share with their children.

At UCL Museums & Collections we have worked with family learning groups since 2004. These are groups of parents who attend regular informal workshops at Primary (ages 5–11) schools, where they learn different ways they can support their children's learning from dedicated family learning tutors working in the school.

We began this work for three main reasons:

- family groups were under-represented in our visitor profile;
- it provided a valuable opportunity for us to discover what family groups could gain from our collections, as schools were the focus of our outreach work up to this point in time;
- it provided an opportunity to introduce the collections to a new audience.

The aim of the project was to develop this audience through a series of engagements with objects, taking objects for handling to groups of parents and children and bringing the groups to visit the museums.

Working in a community

A partnership was established between the museums' Education & Access Officer and local staff working in the London Borough of Haringey. Haringey already had an established program of family learning and parental involvement schemes and had worked with some other museums early in the

¹ See e.g. Every Parent Matters, UK government policy document 2007, available to download www.direct.gov.uk/en/NI1/Newsroom/DG_066880 (accessed November 26, 2009).

2000s so this was a good place for UCL Museums to begin work that was new to us. The partners worked together to plan object handling workshops using our Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, Grant Museum of Zoology and UCL Art Collections. The aims of the outreach sessions were to introduce family groups to objects from the museums, involve them in a variety of object-based activities and develop their knowledge and confidence around objects.

The geographical area of Haringey is north of central London, with communities that often do not travel into the centre. There is a mixed population with some socially excluded groups and a high proportion of recent immigrants. Schools are the place for newcomers' first contact with the community and are the focus of community activity. Activities and events at schools cater for different learning styles through arts, museums, storytelling and many other themes, helping to create the sense of community and build social capital. The aim is to encourage parents to think about how children learn and use what they have available at home and in the community to engage them.

Object experiences

Over the past five years UCL Museums & Collections education staff have worked in most of the schools in the area, delivering handling workshops with family learning teachers. Initially, parents have the task of working out what the objects are and discussing them as a group along with ideas about context and their reactions to them. The children then join the parents and parents handle an object with their child, asking the child many questions about how it feels, what do they think it was used for and similar concepts. The parents and children also take part in a related creative activity such as drawing from the objects or writing stories about them.

During a workshop like this, parents are engaging with their children in a direct way, focusing their attention on one child (which can be a rare time they are able to do this) and the children are always happy to be brought into the session to have special time with their parent. Parents use a range of communication skills such as questioning and providing information; they are encouraged by the workshop staff to give support and positive feedback to their child, to enter into a creative activity with them, to discuss heritage with them, particularly for example during Black History Month when we have run workshops around that theme.

Outcomes

The museum outreach is part of a wide spectrum of experiences for these family groups. However it is an important part particularly where it introduces museums and objects to people who have not had these as part of their cultural norm. It expands parents' knowledge of how they can communicate with their children and gives them new ideas for activities they can do together, from drawing to hunting for natural history specimens to making up stories about objects.

Feedback from the parents has been consistently positive, with many comments that they enjoyed handling the objects and learning something new, they enjoyed the group discussions that came out of the handling and they liked having new activities to do with their children. With some subjects, particularly rocks and fossils, they have been pleasantly surprised at how interesting they have found the workshops.

One less positive outcome for the museums is that the majority of parents have not gone on to visit the museums on their own which we had hoped would happen, especially some whom we had brought to the museum on public transport to show them how easy it is. This is partly to do with the sense of community that is generated locally in many parts of London – residents do not feel a need to visit the central attractions the way that visitors from further afield do.

However this raises the question of why we do outreach – is it to raise awareness of our collections and to promote them to people as places they must visit or is it more to provide access to collections for people who would not otherwise have the opportunity to have that experience, inspiring their interest in learning and education as well as in the artifacts themselves?

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Veena Sharma of the London Borough of Haringey Education Service for work on this partnership.

Contact

Celine West

Head of Learning and Access

UCL Museums and Collections

Address: University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom

E-mail: celine.west@ucl.ac.uk

www.ucl.ac.uk/museums

