

# Heritage in hospitals: Using museum objects to teach communications skills

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## Abstract

*Museum objects can be used to inspire a wide variety of teaching and learning. This paper discusses how museum objects can be used to teach communications skills to medical students as part of a project investigating the benefits of taking museum objects to patients at University College London Hospitals.*

## Introduction

A pilot project investigating the benefits of taking museum objects to patients at University College London Hospitals (UCLH) revealed the huge potential that museum objects can play not only in the improved well-being of patients but also in the training of medical students and specifically how museum objects can be used to teach communication skills.

This article will briefly discuss UCLH National Health Service Foundation Trust's Arts Project: UCLH Arts and its partnership role in the instigation of the Heritage in Hospital research project. It will focus on medical students' expectations of the project, the benefits to them and ultimately demonstrate how this project developed student communication skills.

## University College London Hospitals Arts

UCLH Arts provides a welcoming, uplifting environment for all patients, visitors and staff at UCLH through the use of a varied and stimulating arts programme. It runs an exhibition programme within UCLH, commissions site specific art work, hosts music events, workshops and artist residencies. It also commissions research into the benefits of arts and health and runs events to assist with staff professional development. In so doing it aims to improve patient well being, boost staff morale and widen access to the arts.

## Background

UCLH Arts believes that the provision of the arts within a hospital environment is integral to providing a high quality, modern patient-centered NHS. This belief is underpinned by research<sup>1</sup> and UCLH Arts has instigated a number of research and evaluation projects such as the research discussed here (CHATTERJEE & NOBLE 2008). It demonstrated a benefit to patient well-being but it also highlighted the role that museum collections and the arts can play in the education of medical students.

Past studies have shown that there are benefits in using the arts in the education and training of medical practitioners. The Clod Ensemble's, Performing Medicine project is perhaps the best known project of this type delivering workshops in theatre and movement techniques "to improve presentation, observation and communication skills, focusing on the way participants move, speak, see, interpret and analyse".<sup>2</sup> The Performing Medicine project also run events using visual art that "interrogate cultural/ethical issues relevant to healthcare".<sup>3</sup> Research published in the Journal for Internal Medicine found that formal art observation training improved medical students' visual diagnostic skills (NAGHSHINEH ET AL. 2008). Other research has shown that the arts can improve morale and job satisfaction and consequently job retention (STARICOFF 2006). Despite this evidence,

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<sup>1</sup> There is a broad evidence base for arts in health but it is worth looking at, STARICOFF 2006.

<sup>2</sup> [www.performingmedicine.com](http://www.performingmedicine.com) (accessed December 1, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> [www.performingmedicine.com](http://www.performingmedicine.com) (accessed December 1, 2010).

the case for the use of museum objects in medical student's development of observation and communication skills is still in its infancy. The pilot project discussed here reveals that museum objects can play an important part in the professional development of medical students.

### **Pilot project description**

In 2006 five year 2 phase 1 medical students from UCL opted to undertake research into the role of heritage in hospitals as part of their student – selected component (SSC).

The project was designed specifically to fulfil SSC requirements<sup>4</sup> (TOMORROW'S DOCTORS 2009). It had a series of overarching aims including:

- To provide medical students with communication skills, methods of assessing wellbeing and research techniques;
- To undertake an innovative project to demonstrate the unique, interdisciplinary, role museum collections can play in university teaching and research;
- To evaluate the potential of museum object handling as an enrichment activity in hospitals;
- To widen access to UCL Museums & Collections to a new audience;
- To widen the understanding of the role that the Arts and environment can play in patient care.

Student training covered museum object handling and museum education. In addition they were given information about UCL Museums & Collections (UCL Museums & Collections 2006), the history of UCL and object-specific information about the objects in their loan boxes and were supplied with a reading list which included literature from the arts in health sector. With training complete the students were inducted into UCH's volunteer programme which included training in infection control, patient confidentiality and ward logistics. The project ran for one afternoon a week for 12 weeks.

### **The sessions**

Each student was supplied with a 'loan box' which contained a range of objects from UCL Museums and collections. Students delivered one to one object handling sessions at patients' bedsides using the loan boxes. They assessed patients using quantitative quality of life questionnaires. In addition patients' were asked to complete a mood adjective checklist and sessions were audio-recorded. Once the questionnaires were completed the students asked each patient to choose and explore an object and then a series of questions were posed about the objects to the patients. At the end of the object handling session the quantitative quality of life questionnaires and mood checklist were again completed by patients, the audio recorder was switched off and both parties either washed their hands or used alcohol gel.<sup>5</sup>

### **Formative assessment with students**

As part of the introduction to the SSC the students were given a formative assessment to explore their existing knowledge of arts in health, their feelings towards enrichment and art / cultural intervention in healthcare and their reason for selecting the SSC. Their reasons for choosing the SSC were revealing:

- To increase communication skills with patients;
- To better understand hospital enrichment activities and their benefits;
- To conduct interdisciplinary research and gain new skills;
- To learn more about museums and to work with colleagues across UCL and UCLH.

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<sup>4</sup> See TOMORROW'S DOCTORS 2009.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the sessions see NOBLE & CHATTERJEE (2008) and CHATTERJEE & NOBLE (2009).

### **Summative assessment**

Student communication skills turned out to be an important factor which impacted both the length of the sessions and the students' effectiveness in engaging patients in the project. The assessment revealed that the students felt hindered by their lack of general communication skills; evident when we listened to the audio recordings which were often stilted and sometimes not overly enthusiastic on the part of the students. During training we impressed upon the students the need to employ a sense of excitement and wonder whilst trying to engage patients, but the students general lack of experience and perhaps confidence in talking openly with older people did seem to impact on their delivery of sessions. One student in particular highlighted concerns over "not knowing how to talk to older people, especially when they are very ill". The pressures of an NHS centered on targets and reduced waiting times means that clinicians deal with patients quickly and sometimes this can maybe at the expense of the patient's dignity. Poor communication skills would only serve to reinforce this.

### **Conclusions**

The questions used in the delivery of the sessions were not the usual history taking that students might have previously experienced. The sessions, centered on the objects, and allowed students to have a different kind of conversation with patients which opened up the possibility for students to learn more about the individual patient. The sessions proved to be a great leveler; challenging the medical student's perceived role of expert and doctor, and testing their ability to communicate effectively with a person as opposed to just focusing on an illness.

Despite the students inexperience in the delivery of the sessions they all felt that the module had enhanced their patient communication skills and importantly given them first hand experience of everyday ward life in their pre-clinical years. In addition the module allowed them the space to think creatively about patient care, and how they might be perceived by patients. The conversations that students had through the objects with the patients brought home to them the importance of considering the whole person when treating a patient. It emphasized the need for regular non-clinical communication training for medical students taking them out of their comfort zone and challenging them to work with patients in new ways.

Museum objects teach new communications skills to the medical students by:

- Revealing new information about the patients and consequently the role that they can play in patient / doctor interaction;
- Providing a context for a different kind of conversation, which takes the time to respect the patient as an individual and therefore challenged them to look beyond the illness.

The use of museum objects in medical education has huge potential; as seen in approaches used in Clod Ensemble's Performing Medicine project, objects can be used to encourage analytical, observational skills and also explore socio-cultural issues relevant to health care. Museum practice has a potential to offer transferable skills to medical students particularly when comparing cataloguing and recording the provenance, condition of objects with approaches to patient history taking. This project demonstrated that challenging students perceptions of what patient care can be, leads to improvements in student communication skills and consequently an improved patient experience.

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