

Arts university student mentors and gallery peer leaders: researching the story of a partnership

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Introduction

This paper reports on a 2007/8 funded project involving a partnership between a UK arts university, University College Falmouth (UCF) and a UK gallery, Tate St. Ives (TSI), both situated in Cornwall (a rural and remote county in the far south-west of England). As part of a wider national project investigating gallery education, we analyse a successful collaboration aimed at engaging undergraduate student mentors in a gallery peer leadership project. We tell the story of an action research partnership addressing the question: what frameworks and strategies can support peer-led learning in an art gallery context?

TSI was opened in 1993 to showcase St. Ives School of modernist art in its Cornish context, and is one of four Tate sites (following two in London and one in Liverpool). It is committed to learning programmes that engage a diverse regional audience, but in terms of the socio-economic context of Cornwall, recognises real barriers to inclusion in relation to the involvement of young people. UCF, a specialist arts institution with a long history of teaching Fine Art, has developed a strong commitment to Widening Participation and embeds peer mentoring as a key part of its retention activities. The college were looking for local partners to enhance employability agendas beyond their mainstream, practice-based curriculum.

TSI approached UCF as a research partner to explore its peer leadership training, bringing limited pump-priming funding from *Enquire* (see *Enquire*, 2008). The focus was on learning *through* engagement, as undergraduate student mentors worked on a peer leadership project. The purpose of the research was to identify learning between gallery facilitators and young people, and between peer mentors and young people. Research on the project, embedded as an action research cycle, recorded the planning, development and delivery of a sustainable peer-led initiative. It is noteworthy that previous attempts to forge partnerships between TSI and UCF across the 25 mile divide from the south to the north coast of Cornwall had foundered, but this proposal was timely as UCF were actively seeking to research the effectiveness of their peer mentors.

Literature

The research was informed by three different but complementary strands of literature. First was the national and local policy literature around engaging young people in the work of galleries. The government's commitment to opening up opportunities for a range of activities for young people with the creative industries (DCMS, 2003, DfES, 2004, 2005) raises issues around the need for youth-friendly spaces and best practice in working with young people. At a regional and local level, the practical challenge of doing so are explored (KEAP, 2006, Harland & Kinder, 1999) and examples of peer-led programmes of work-based activity for young people are described (Tate, 2005, Pringle, 2006).

Second, was the growing academic literature on peer mentoring (often considered part of effective interventions by student support services in HE to ensure success and retention). This includes the involvement of second and final year undergraduates working with first years, targeting areas normally associated with high rates of withdrawal and failure (Saunders & Gibbon, 1998), in which mentors are the 'complementary' facilitators empowering students to become pro-active learners. Also important are analyses of mentor characteristics (Terrion & Leonard, 2007), which emphasise psycho-social functions including: communication skills; supportiveness; trustworthiness; interdependence; empathy; shared values; enthusiasm and flexibility, alongside a willingness to commit time in a helping relationship. Smith (2008) describes peer learning assistants who tutor individuals, support through email and organise extra-curricular study. The lack of research into the socialised interactions implicit in the peer mentor role were questioned by Colvin, (2007) who sees the peer mentor role as contributing to learning becoming a social rather than a private activity. Campbell & Campbell (2007), in a US context, highlight the importance of ethnic-matching of mentors, against the relative unimportance of gender matching of mentors, for a successful mentoring relationship which enhances achievement.

Third was the developing literature on HE/gallery learning partnerships, some of which suggests a frustration around the lack of HE/museum collaboration to support student learning. Reynolds & Speight (2008) report a positive small scale study 'scaffolding' the HE learner to 'look' in the gallery, while Butcher & Kennedy (2009) explore the potential for more active HE/gallery collaboration.

Participants

UCF's three undergraduate Fine Art peer mentors were sampled from a well-established cross-institutional programme which selected, trained and monitored a large team of Year 2 volunteers. Peer mentoring was conceptualised as primarily support, rather than a teaching/academic role, with tasks listed including: support new students from pre-entry (e-mentoring at a distance and phone/texting support) to induction activities (face-to-face social/pastoral support) to critical interventions (associated with stress of first assessment, not wanting to return after Xmas vacation) during Year 1. Mentors were paid (a little) by the Widening Participation office as part of strategic retention activities.

TSl's three peer leaders (aged 16-19) together with the three student mentors (aged 22-25) took part in a two day Peer Leaders training course at TSl, and a half day introduction to collecting research data at UCF. The training course explores teambuilding and engaging with work in the galleries on day one, with day two developing the idea of leadership and gives the group a developed understanding of working with groups at TSl. Working as a team, the group built on these experiences over a two month period to devise and deliver a Young Tate event at TSl aimed at 13 - 25 year olds. This process involved leading a workshop with 12 other young people to make costumes in response to artworks in the exhibition, and working closely with the Learning Team to coordinate, market, manage and document the final event, culminating in an evening event titled *Come as you art!* which included a fashion show of the costumes modelled by Young Tate, music, a variety of interactive activities and inviting guests to come dressed as a work from the Tate Collection.

Methods

Data-capturing methods were developed in collaboration with the young people participating, who were actively included in the process of analysis. The data collected addressed the learning experience throughout the two day Peer Leaders training course and over a period of three months when participants applied the training to real situations. Methods were informed by the *Inspiring Learning for All* framework (MLA, 2004), a flexible structure for evaluation of learning in gallery and museum settings including Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs). Data collection methods included: timed responses; knowledge surveys; focus groups; observation; one to one interviews and field notes. In addition the project was documented in a variety of ways. This wide range of participant data collection methods were utilised during a training course, and then as that training was applied to authentic gallery learning situations.

Summary findings

Findings, though tentative, were positive. We have analysed the data using the framework of the GLOs. In terms of knowledge and understanding, at the start of the project, undergraduates from UCF were valued as coming with a minimum of 12 months student mentoring experience, and thus having a strong awareness of working in a peer-led, student-centred context. TSl peer leaders had an existing knowledge of the gallery and its programmes. Collaborative activities appeared to support learning:

'I've learnt how, in transferring a piece of artwork into an activity, it helps you understand it and contribute from other points of view and you go away remembering the piece of artwork'

In terms of skills, our analysis suggests the key skills for being an effective peer leader are communication and management (including self-organisation, problem-solving, time-management and decision-making). These skills were developed through the planned, work-based learning opportunity, which might have been different from prior learning experiences:

'I also like working under pressure as well...like quickly, that was fun...I think going with your first instinct is quite a good one'

In terms of attitudes and values, a key change was observed in trust and confidence in sharing. Participants noted the work-based learning context was an important element in enabling learners to test out their ideas (eg interpretation) as part of the training. Not only was an enhanced attitude towards the role of the gallery demonstrated, this was achieved through co-learning and collaboration:

'I was surprised by quite how quickly the group kind of moulded...at the start it was quite distant and calm, and by the end we were all just kind of joining in'

The objectives around activity, behaviour and progression were particularly interesting. Significant learning occurred through dialogue between young people and gallery staff, resulting in an autonomous 'learning without realising' and a shared aspiration that 'there shouldn't be any people excluded from a gallery'. For example:

'I think if I had just come on my own, I don't think I would have been as much involved with the artwork itself. But doing this session I've learnt a lot and different aspects...of the gallery'

Perhaps most pleasingly, the data suggested a high level of enjoyment, inspiration and creativity had been achieved. Participants reported feeling challenged, but the experience of meeting the challenges had been stimulating (due, as they said, to teamwork and peer support):

'I think in a way, part of the challenge has been bringing yesterday's enthusiasm over to today. By the end of yesterday we were all kind of 'yeah!' And we managed to bring that to this morning as well'

The final outcome (a successful planned show) was both a motivating achievement and evidence of self-development. Transfer of ownership demonstrated the impact of the training.

Conclusion

By the end of the project, it was notable that UCF students showed a significant leap in general knowledge of Tate and TSI, including the mission, ethos and function of TSI and its staff. We conclude the voluntary engagement of undergraduate art students in an extra-curricular gallery-based project can enhance their learning (particularly in relation to employability), and that of their peers. For example, one participant had always known she wanted to be a secondary art teacher and following her degree aimed to complete a PGCE (Post graduate certificate in education). After completing the collaborative training she decided to apply for a SCITT (School centred initial teacher training) course, as she enjoyed work based learning and felt this would be a more interesting and rewarding pathway to becoming a teacher.

Undergraduate peer mentors in a collaborative HE/gallery project can, we conclude, galvanise the work of curators with young people. We therefore recommend extending the work of undergraduate peer mentors to explore best practice in gallery Peer Leadership schemes. Importantly, a methodological conclusion is that research into HE/gallery partnerships should be participative research as a practice. To make this happen more often, there is a pressing need for ideas to be shared around alternative data collection methods to use with young people in gallery learning. A key area could be exploring the potential of new technologies in creative research methodologies.

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