

Executive Summary

Sources of Inspiration: How do design students learn from museum collections and other sources of inspiration?

1. Rationale. Whilst museum collections in particular are seen as important sources of inspiration for art and design students, there is actually very little knowledge about how students learn from both museum collections (Speight, C, 2006) and other sources of inspiration. In order that HE generally and museums in particular can help students get the most out of this important resource, this research aimed to find out more about the ways in which students do learn from museum collections and other sources of inspiration. Although educational theorists have suggested a number of models for understanding the way students learn, their applicability to the experience of practice based design students within HE still needs to be explored (Davies, A 2007).

2 Aims and objectives

Research aim: To find out more about how design students learn from museum collections and other sources of inspiration.

Research objectives:

- 2.1. To produce an in-depth analysis of the learning processes of undergraduate students from design courses from the University of Brighton and post graduate students from the Royal College of Art.
- 2.2. To enhance enhanced knowledge and understanding of specific ways in which ways design students on Graphic Design and illustration courses learn through the use of museum collections and other sources of inspiration that will inform future curriculum development and learning, teaching and assessment practices.
- 2.3. To collect data to inform pedagogic research in the area of teaching, learning in relation to the use of collections and other material.
- 2.4. To evaluate the methodology and methods used to interrogate the student experience.
- 2.5. To make evidence available to HE and the museums sector about ways of working together to maximise benefits to both sectors and their communities.

3. Context: The research was funded by the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning through Design (CETLD). This is a partnership between the University of Brighton, Royal College of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum. The partners were keen to improve their understanding of these processes, so that needs and experiences of students could be taken into account when museums and Higher Education (HE) consider their provision. The research was led by principal investigator Professor Gina Wisker, Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Brighton. The Research was carried out by Christina Reading, Research Fellow at the CETLD. Advisers on the project included Allan Davis (HEA) and Ann Asha (CETLD).

4. Method: The principal research method consisted of in-depth interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate students from a range of design courses at the University of Brighton and the Royal college of Art. The students were recruited to project on a voluntary basis and each gave full and informed consent to their involvement. The students were interviewed at their place of study about their experiences of learning from museum collections and other sources of inspiration. Results were analysed using phenomenographic research methods pioneered by Marton and Saljo (1978).

5. Statement of findings. The research found that three aspects of a student's experience impact on the way that they learnt from museum collections and other sources of inspiration; they were;

5.1 Students memory and prior association of museum collections and other sources of inspiration.

5.2 Students current intrinsic approach to learning.

The research identified four levels. of student experience Isolated (Level 1), Introduced (Level 2), Integrated (Level 3) and Immersed (Level 4) in which students demonstrated an increasingly powerful approach to the way that they learned from museum collections and other sources of inspiration.

Each level is characterized as by the students expanding awareness across a number of key learning dimensions .The dimensions are self authorship, independent learning, dialogue about contextual sources, including museum collections and perceptions of their relevance to contemporary practice, understanding of professional inquiry or research processes in art and design and the practical and conceptual tools used in these processes. The research suggests that students focus in each of these dimensions affects how students learn from museum collections and other sources of inspiration.

5.3 Students also identified a number of factors that affected their engagement with museums. Although the significance of these factors varied across the levels, there was nevertheless, a general sense that student encountered a range of problems in their engagement with museum collections. It found that in the less powerful levels (levels 1&2) students judgments about the time visiting collections took away from academic studies, the cost of travel to visit collections and their limited confidence and skills (particularly drawing in public) to work with the collections had a negative impact on their engagement with museum collections. In the more powerful levels (levels 3&4) students were generally found to be more confident about working with museum collections but were often critical of the arrangements for accessing information and services from the museums.

6. Conclusion .The research concludes that theoretical models in learning and teaching (Biggs, J 2002, Marton & Saljo, 1976, Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) are useful for understanding HE practice based design students conceptions of and approaches to learning from museum collections and other sources of inspiration. But these models

may need to be adjusted to accommodate the affect of memories stemming from childhood and previous educational experiences on students approaches .They also need to be adjusted to account for the students responses the to challenges they encounter in particular learning environments such as museums. The research found that whilst students intrinsic approaches to learning were important for determining their approach to learning from museum collections students did identify particular problems associated with learning from these sources.

It also concludes that improving the way that students learn from museum collections and other sources of inspiration would be aided by firstly developing students capacity for self authorship and independent learning, secondly by ensuring that students understand the relevance of broader contextual sources, including museum collections to their practice,. Thirdly by making the inquiry process design more explicit and offering support to students as they make the transition from the initial stages of a project to more focused work Finally by introducing student friendly measures in museums and by equipping students with the confidence and skills to work more effectively with collections.

7. Recommendations;

The research suggests a number of recommendations for HE and museums;

HE to introduce specific measures to help students make the transition to independent learning and builds their capacity for self authorship perhaps through PDP style activities.

HE and museums to explain the relevance of museum collections and other contextual sources to student's contemporary practice.

HE to consider way in which it can ensure that students understand the entire research/inquiry process in design and are supported through the transitional stages to more focused work.

HE and museums to demonstrate to students how museum collections can be used to solve design problems at all stages in the design process.

HE to offer more support to students through transitional phases in their understanding or skills development

Museums to consider ways to reduce the time and cost of accessing collections. Measures might include free student admission, building virtual collections and where possible taking museum objects to HE.

Museums and HE to introduce measures to improve students' confidence and skills with collections. These measures might include, drawing, observational, interpretation and handling skills.

Museums to consider offering student friendly sessions in which the public are not present and the lights and seating arrangements are adjusted for drawing.

Museums and HE to introduce measures to improve students' access to information about the time scales, permission and routes through which to access collections not on public display.

These measures are necessary because learning to use museum collections and other sources of inspiration effectively is important for design students, enabling them improve performance whilst at HE but, also equipping them with the skills that will sustain them afterwards in their professional lives. In particular learning to use museum collections effectively whilst at HE may be especially important for design students as they can be powerful source that they can continue to access after they have left HE.

Improving the way that design students learn from museum collections requires a collaborative approach between museums and HE, neither party can achieve this effectively working alone. Providing an educational resource for design students has always been an important part of the historical purpose of museums such as the V&A. To ensure that it helps students in a way that it is useful to them , museums and HE will need to be prepared to find ways to work together to shape their service for students.