

Innovation in Partnership: An introduction to collaborative working between supplementary schools, universities, museums and arts and heritage organisations

A conference hosted by the [British Museum](#) in partnership with the [National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education](#).

November 22, 2013

What the conference was about

This event was a great opportunity for different sectors who do not always work together to meet and get to know each other. The morning session set the scene for how partnerships between the various sectors that were represented could be shaped. Case studies around: collaboration, co-development and sustainability were presented. We were presented with compelling narratives about best practice that showed the efficacy of cross sector partnership-working and its implications for improved results in educational attainment. As a case study illustrating collaboration, [Charmian Kenner](#), Head of MA Multilingualism at Goldsmiths spoke about her [research](#) that found that supplementary schools promoted greater learning outcomes for their students because of their innovative negotiated learning pathways. The research found that these learning pathways were constructed from sophisticated and often under-valued teacher-student relationships that were enhanced by the multi lingual learning environments found in the schools.

As a case study illustrating co-development, Marie Taylor from the Colchester and Ipswich Museums Service spoke about their "Unlocked" project that involved young people being introduced to objects within the collections without any prior information, so that they could research and develop their own interpretations of the collections. Arifa Malik from the [myDeen Foundation](#) described how visits to museums and galleries helped to inspire her young people by bringing to life certain professions such as archaeology in so doing, making the curriculum subjects needed for these professions seem more interesting and exciting.

Finally, for sustainability, Sarah Price from Durham University and Matt Greenhall from the [National Archives](#) talked about their four year [Stories of the World](#) project that explored their collections at Durham's Oriental Museum.

After lunch we attended two of the workshops below that were designed to help us:

- gain an understanding of each other's sector
- establish partnerships in terms of their logistics and practicalities
- build successful partnerships: building networks of support
- build sustainable partnerships: generating new interests and enthusiasms

My Reflections

For me, the whole event was shaped by an important morning-session question that was posed by Glenis Leitch from the [GIL Centre](#), when she asked, "how do you balance the partnership between supplementary schools and museums?" The panel attempted to answer this fundamental question by talking about institutional buy-in and equitable negotiation with partners and such like. However, what struck me the most during the day (especially during one of the workshops that I attended) was just how fixated we all are on the paradigm of the PROJECT.

To varying degrees (from conversations I had with many museum and gallery representatives), the problem did not seem to be about the outreach work museums and galleries do or issues around sustainability because they are core funded to outreach. The problem appeared to focus on connecting with other types of less visible grass roots community audiences as represented by supplementary schools. I've always believed that as institutions, perhaps all of us have the concept of community engagement in reverse, where we see engagement in terms of funded, time-specific projects that bring us into partnerships with communities. Then we think hard about how we can build sustainability into those projects. During the conference and upon further reflection, I discovered that we need to re-position our thinking towards building relationships outside of projects, where in this case, our communities regularly access the amazing work museums and galleries are already doing for free (at the point of access) whilst at the same time building personal face to face relationships with their culture providers' incumbent outreach workers. In this way, over time, an organic relationship could develop where regular visits to the museums/galleries would be strategically planned to enhance the delivery of supplementary education. It would be at this point that we would only need to use specially funded projects to highlight specific events/initiatives/celebrations as foci that would occur within the organic, constant background relationship building process. This would mean that issues around project sustainability would become irrelevant because they would be taking place within an overarching organic relationship which would not be prescribed by the confines of a project bid. In practical terms, this would mean that challenges around the power dynamics between institutions and communities, as Glenis Leitch mentioned would not need to be fitted into the narrow confines of a time and funding-specific project but would have the time to be explored and to flourish organically. So in due course if partners wanted to co-deliver a funded project for a specific event, then a mutual understanding and trust would already have been built up and would already exist within an overarching framework of relationship within which the funded time-limited project would sit.

Moving forward with what I learned

As a university, I feel that our role could well be about bringing together all the stakeholders into a relationship of this kind: a relationship broker across the sectors. The implications for my current engagement practice is that my grass roots community groups (a small hub of supplementary schools that I am currently

working with) do not know about the amazing work our museums and galleries in Manchester are already funded to do and our excellent museums and galleries are not aware of this particular constituency in their local and surrounding communities either because they are only familiar with schools in their local areas due to their higher visibility. Alongside introducing the hub of supplementary schools that I work with to their city's museums and galleries, I will also encourage our galleries to invite the hub to their on-going visits and outreach work with their clutch of mainstream schools, in this way promoting cultural partnership working between supplementary and mainstream schools.

To watch and read more about my Public Engagement work with Supplementary schools in Manchester, please click [here](#).

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