



Reflections from Year 1 of the OM Programme

Over the summer we have been reading and reflecting upon all the material you have sent us or posted to websites and nings over the last year or so as well as the notes we have sent to you of our visits and conversations. This reflection has helped us get a sense of some of the key issues you are addressing and what has changed since we prepared the baseline evidence analysis report for each OM participant gallery or museum. We've now chosen a few of these issues to write about in this second newsletter so we can share some of our reflections with you. We would really welcome any thoughts, comments or questions they raise for you.

NEXT PRACTICE

The French political thinker and historian, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1835 that 'There is nothing more arduous than the apprenticeship of liberty'; a view quoted more recently in an article in the International Journal of Ethics entitled 'The Difficulties of Democracy' by Joseph Dana Miller.

It came to mind when we were reading TWAM's frank assessment of the first year of their Our Museum programme. *'The first year of the programme has seen us achieve notable success with a strong core engagement team and significant debate with staff, volunteers and community workers and service users. We have also had some great events where people have shared very personal testimony of the difference museums have made in their lives. The pace of development has, however, not been as fast as we would have liked. Perhaps we didn't realise just how difficult meaningful, self-reflective, organisational change really is!'*

We would suggest that TWAM are deeply engaged in developing 'next practice', which is described by the Innovation Unit <http://www.innovationunit.org/> as '*practice which is potentially more powerful than current 'good practice'; in advance of hard evidence of effectiveness, but informed by research, and developed through skilled and informed practitioners.*' By definition, it is likely to be both arduous and initially imperfect.

STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

We suspect that whilst the museums and art galleries selected to be part of the Our Museum programme had significant experience of working with a range of community partners on projects and short-term programmes, they had less experience of working with them on long-term strategic initiatives - such as major capital developments, contemporary collecting policies, fund-raising programmes, Board or volunteer development - or other aspects of organisational change.

Strategic collaboration requires a willingness to share information, power and decision-making responsibilities. Are OM organisations ready to collaborate in this more demanding way? How hard is it to risk stepping out of the comfort zone of 'what we've always done' or to find 'reasons' why a more demanding approach cannot be tested?

Hackney Museum and its community partners have decided to address some of these issues head-on, by developing written Community Partner Agreements and Terms of Reference for the Steering Group (i.e. their core engagement team). These clarify the role of the community partner as (for example) to *'Create a sustainable mechanism for decision-making with Hackney Museum in the long term'* and to *'Ensure that community representatives have a strong role in decision making and project governance and our communities have a meaningful say in delivery and content of projects.'* At the same time it is openly acknowledged that there will be some occasions when Council officers have to make final decisions. On this subject it states that *'The Steering Group has an important role to play in the direction of the 'Our Museum' project and where possible its decisions will be implemented. However there may be circumstances when a final decision will be taken by Council officers.'*

We think other OM organisations might find Hackney's approach interesting and we'd like to hear about any systems you already use or are trying out that you think might be useful to others. For example, these might include memoranda of understanding with community partners, clear and shared criteria of quality standards for public exhibitions, procedures for joint planning of events, processes for shared evaluations.

Strategic collaboration also involves agreeing the long-term or overall aims and interests of the parties who want to work together and the means of achieving the aims through collaboration. This has implications for everyone involved in the collaboration, not just the museum or gallery. At its simplest this might be expressed as 'what's in it for us?' and 'what can we do better together than on our own?' There is of course no single way to establish a strategic collaboration and experiment and risk taking with this process is one of the aspects of the Our Museum programme

which offers rich learning. How is working more strategically with community partners contributing to organisational change?

At The Lightbox the Project Co-ordinator began this process by '*holding a series of forums, with staff, volunteers, Trustees, Friends, the Borough Council, community groups we have worked with and community groups we haven't worked with, to establish a baseline of perceptions*' about the gallery. In contrast at Amgueddfa Cymru/National Museum Wales many of the organisations, which are now Community Partners, were approached to help the museum formulate the original bid to become part of the OM programme. We are keen to understand more about the diverse ways in which you are all working towards strategic collaboration.

ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

The core of OM is about achieving organisational change. We anticipate that as the OM programme progresses there will be an increasing focus on the implications for each participating museum or gallery, as well as for community partners, of what has been previously 'labelled' as OM activity, for everything else organisations are doing and aspiring to achieve.

What was once a new initiative or a risky adventure will become a normal part of how you work. Participatory practice will begin to transform organisational practice. Some experiments or innovations will be valuable precisely because they let us all learn a lot about what doesn't work! And of course everyone is working in complex and shifting contexts that inevitably influence the OM programme: internal change processes need to align with changing external conditions such as funding levels or unexpected opportunities. How you hold on to the principles of OM yet adapt and change your approach and the activities you undertake to respond to those changing circumstances is particularly valuable – essential - if the learning for the sector from the OM programme is going to be robust and transferable.

The experience of the Royal Shakespeare Company in embarking on a major programme of change in the way that it is led and managed, documented in *all together: a creative approach to organisational change*¹, is a fascinating read – not as a 'how to' guide but as an honest and revealing account of one approach to organisational change. Another book which gives an open reflective account of organisational change in the museum sector is '*Museums and the Paradox of Change*' by Robert R. Janes.²

DISSEMINATION

One of OM's overall objectives is to achieve significant shifts in participatory practice within the sector nationwide. So we are already beginning to think about examples of approaches, challenges, risks taken and successes achieved that we will want to

¹ www.nesta.org.uk/assets/documents/rsc_book

² Robert R. Janes '*Museums and the Paradox of Change*' 3rd edition, Routledge, 2013

highlight in our final report. One example might be Glasgow Museum's experiment with 'Cultural Ambassadors'. This programme is attracting staff participants from across all museum sites and departments and aims for them to *'promote the objectives and outcomes the Our Museum process is trying to achieve to their respective colleagues across the service as well as develop their own understanding of and skills in working with communities.'*

We imagine that in Year 2 OM museums/galleries and their community partners will also begin to think about sharing their experiences with others and/or begin to prepare to do so in Year 3. What do you think is important to disseminate from your experience of working on the OM programme to other museums in the sector? Achievements? Challenges? Surprises? Unsolved questions?

How can PHF support you with sharing your experiences and what opportunities do you have within your own networks? How can community partners best be involved in this dissemination? How are your community partners already spreading information about what you're doing together through their own networks? What can you use to illustrate to others what is changing in your organisation and the way it works because of your involvement in the programme? How can you show to others what your commitment to museums working with communities as active partners looks like in practice? Can you describe what has changed in the way your museum or gallery is organised or led? What are the best ways to communicate: words, pictures, moving images, social media, presentations, events or ...?

For example AC/NMW has begun to plan to share experience to date with the wider sector: *'We will chart our journey to date through presenting digital stories. We will explore how our methods of working are starting to break down barriers to participation and address the resistance to change that is present in some areas of the Museum. We will demonstrate the new approaches to inclusion and engagement we have taken. These digital stories will be produced with volunteers and community partners to collectively portray our process of working together, highlighting the challenges and benefits for the Museum and community partners alike.'*

Meetings of the AC/NMW Engagement Team are filmed and this footage is being used in multiple ways, for example, to reflect upon the processes and dialogue that led to particular ideas or actions, to edit for inclusion on the website and use in presentations to the sector. At Belfast Exposed ning and web posts describing what is happening at the gallery, and creating a visual record of activity, is now co-ordinated regularly by a member of the team.

We'd like to hear about any plans you may have for dissemination during our Year 2 Evaluation Visit.



RRFINTERPRETATIONPLANv5andv10

Of all the documents you sent us during the course of Year 1, this is one of our favourites, partly because the title sounds initially a little unpromising! It is the interpretation plan for Glasgow Museums' award-winning Red Road Flats exhibition: a great illustration of how a museum aims to meet OM indicators.

Do send us examples of these kinds of documents: the ones you think are good examples of change and/or embedding development. For example Ryedale Folk Museum working collaboratively with staff, volunteers and community partners on a new mission statement for their celebrations next year, or the Museum of East Anglian Life's work on re-branding which was done in consultation with staff, volunteers and community partners. It could be a re-written set of job descriptions, it could be an induction plan for new Trustees.

LEADERSHIP

In the next few months the Director or Chief Executive of almost half of the participating venues leaves to take up new posts and a new senior member of staff will be recruited. We see this as a great learning opportunity: How does the transition take place? What effect does it have on the OM programme? This kind of change takes place all the time across the sector so we need to learn more about what happens to an organisation when particular individuals leave. It also raises important issues, for example, about sharing of authority and the nature of effective leadership in an organisation that aspires to work with communities as active partners.

The person who has nothing to learn is certainly incapable of creative dialogue.

Michael Boyd, 20 June 2008

'Leaders' are not just Directors or Chief Executives even though they play a crucial role in organisational change. On a day-to-day level, the attitude and level of commitment of a venue manager may be what makes the difference to staff who want to work in a different kind of way or to the success or failure of a new approach.

In legal terms the leader of the organisation – the people who are formally accountable for the organisation – are the Trustees, or their equivalents such as the elected members in a local authority. So when we think about leadership who do we mean and what is their role in bringing about organisational change?

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

OM has consistently championed the value of reflective practice and during Year 2, we'd like to understand more about what kinds of approaches are helping community partners and museums/galleries to reflect together. What's working and why? Is reflective practice paid lip service – suddenly remembered when an evaluation visit is coming up - or is it becoming fully embedded in your work?

How are you managing to track the path between reflection and action? What has changed as a result of joint reflection? Do community partners challenge as well as support and, if so, how are they encouraged to do so?

In some of the OM museums/galleries, there are a high proportion of staff, long term volunteers and/or Friends in the core engagement team. Does this lead to strength, because there is a high level of existing shared understanding? Does it enable the previously silent to have their say? How does it balance with the 'fresh eye' of the new collaborator? What are the difficult conversations and what approaches have people taken to encourage them?

At AC/NMW the engagement team has developed visual diagrams as an integral part of what they call their 'self-evaluation tool' which they use consistently in their on-going self-evaluation and reflection: *'Each visual responds in turn to one of the Our Museum outcomes. These visuals have stimulated our discussions, have helped us reflect on what has taken place and have stimulated our thoughts for further work and learning.'*

The visual below, for example, was devised for Outcome 2: Community Agency. It is *'aimed at linking together the crucial elements of the project and ensuring that we are working together across all the strands and sharing in the decision-making*

process.'



BUILDINGS: SILENT BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION?

After our first evaluation visits to you last year we recommended a couple of changes to the OM Indicators of Success which the Steering Group agreed. One of these was about how the character of a building or the ways physical space is used affects what the place feels like to the visitor and the quality of their experience. At Belfast Exposed the new Exchange Gallery *'provides a space for conversations and collaborations between Belfast Exposed and our local and international arts and community partners. We promote public, community and curatorial engagement through projects, residencies and exhibitions. The Exchange Gallery houses our digital archive browser, allowing visitors to view a digitised selection of photographs from our photographic archive alongside images from private and museum collections.'*

It will be interesting to see how this physical change, and the new approaches it allows, influences progress towards the strategic changes of their OM programme. Similarly in Bristol the refurbishment of the Art Gallery is being used as an opportunity to think about how space is used.

CHANGES IN PROPOSALS

Over the course of three years, it is inevitable that engagement teams will need or want to make changes to the programme of work they suggested in their initial proposal to PHF and even changes to the programme of work they have planned for a particular year. For example, because of delays experienced in Year 1 of the

programme, several OM organisations reported an under-spend and made proposals for how they would use that under-spend.

What interests us as evaluators, looking back at your initial proposals to PHF and reviewing your Year 2 plans, is how proposed changes to the way funds are used relate to your overall strategic change objectives and the conditions set by the Steering Group in the Year 1 feedback.

We are also very interested in how being part of OM influences the way participants deal with the wider realities of public sector funding at the moment. We all know that government and many voluntary/third sector organisations can't work within available grant in aid by simply reducing – again - the scope or the scale of what they do. This means radical re-thinking of almost every aspect of how organisations work. Funds from OM are clearly not given to solve organisational problems caused by this kind of pressure or to generate a few more 'projects' which, whilst good in themselves, don't help learn more about how communities and museums work together as active partners. However being part of OM is an opportunity to see whether working toward the 4 outcomes and indicators does help organisations respond well to changes prompted by current economic conditions or whether there is an unconscious, or even conscious, shift towards using the funding to solve other pressing organisational problems.

SUSTAINABILITY

As Year 2 moves forward, we will be asking a set of questions around legacy and sustainability. What will you hope to carry forward after the OM programme has finished and what opportunities and challenges do you see for doing this? It may not be feasible to sustain everything you have been able to do, but if not, what kind of legacy do you expect the work to leave?

AND FINALLY - DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION

At its most dynamic, 'next practice' is sometimes called 'disruptive innovation' and described by the International Center for Leadership in Education in this way:

'Disruptive innovation is not about making an existing product or technology better. It's about creating something that's completely different or revamping an existing product in such a way that it will never again be seen as the same thing. Take the transistor radio, for example. It allowed people to listen to the radio anywhere, not just where there was an outlet for the plug, because it was portable.'

The downside of disruptive innovation is that the first versions are not perfect. Although people could take transistor radios wherever they wanted, the sound quality was not comparable to the console radio. But, it improved after several models, eventually overtaking the former technology'

In Year 2, we look forward to hearing more about your disruptive innovations, imaginative next practice and 'two steps forward, one step back' organisational change!

Gerri and Sally ... and Helen