

Engagement to co-curation

I'm in charge of Gateshead University
of the Third Age, for people over 50
who still want to engage in learning and development.

The project started with our regional U3A
wanting to do an art project.

A group of us descended on the art gallery,
there was about 30 of us
from right across the region,
and in truth it was an absolute disaster.

Far too many of us, too diverse,
everyone had their own agenda
and the whole thing just dissolved.

For myself, I was quite embarrassed by that,
so as chair of Gateshead U3A,
I went back to the art gallery
and said, "Can we really focus on a small project?"

Five colleagues who actually joined me
who were keen to look at art.

The staff were amazing, we trained to use EMu,
we were trained how to handle paintings,
how we should move around
the gallery, et cetera, so we didn't cause any harm.

The staff asked us to go down into the archives
and just look at the paintings.

We did that over a series of a few weeks.

We each chose five paintings that we liked.

That was the only criteria.

We had to each vote on each other's paintings
so in the end we had 15 paintings
that all of us actually thought were quite good.

We then spent a few months doing the research
into the paintings, into the artist
and we wrote our storyboards.

We also put the information
into the electronic database and updated the records.

We found some amazing information,
which was a great help to the staff of the Shipley as well.
We decided with the staff at Shipley
that actually we should have tours
of the archives for the public
and they became an instant success.
We did in the first year,
we must have taken over 200 members
of the public on a tour.
We're now planning our third tour.
When we embarked on this project
I feel ethically I wouldn't work as a volunteer
to fulfil a member of staff's role,
so we made that quite clear.
We wanted to do something extra to increase footfall,
to get the members of the public interested in the art
that is on offer at Shipley Art Gallery.
And that was our key objective, and it worked.
We did just that. Staff also came,
especially the front of house staff.
They felt that they learned, you know, about artists.
They'd seen paintings but had never explored the paintings
and I think they just saw a group of amateurs enjoying themselves.
And our knowledge base
has increased phenomenally.
It's been really good.
And we ask every member of the public
to complete an evaluation.
Which has been really positive.
We did charge £2 and with the money
we spoke to the director of TWAM
and asked if we could buy
some stools that would fold,
so if anyone was disabled
they could enjoy the paintings
and have a seat at the same time.

But what's been absolutely fantastic is
that the paintings we chose
have been put in the gallery in an exhibition.
Our storyboard of a hundred words
was actually put next to each painting
and is still there, and we did tours of the gallery itself
and now we've had 1, 2, 3...3 exhibitions
and the main gallery now has our work.
And they stencilled a whole piece
about the U3A onto the wall
and the collaboration between TWAM
and the University of the Third Age.
And it just looks fantastic.
We've had articles written and published
and, you know, it's been really positive,
really positive experience.