The project: background and aims

The project developed out of an existing relationship with Oxford Spires Academy. We shared an idea with teachers to work with objects and stories from the Ancient Near East Gallery at The Ashmolean Museum. The students are part of a large group working on a programme at school with dedicated EAL teachers and are from Eritrea, Syria and South Sudan.

The teachers' aims were to improve the students' English by talking, listening and writing. They wanted students to have an outcome they could take pride in and share in school at a sharing assembly.

The Museum's aims were to learn about new ways of working and to deepen our relationship with the school. We wanted to give the students a sense of belonging and being part of the Museum and Oxford and to see themselves represented in the galleries.

The project linked with plans for changes to the Museum's Ancient Near East Gallery. A focus for the work was to learn from the responses of this group of young people and to explore which objects and stories were of most interest to them. This information will feed into future plans for the gallery.

A key aim of the work was to share a range of voices and viewpoints about objects in the Museum's collections. During each visit, experienced radio producer Penny Boreham recorded the students' responses. At the end of the project, she edited and produced a recording for each student that captured their experience. Each student wrote a gallery label with their own response to an object which was designed and placed next to it in the display case.

What we did

During the first visit, students visited a study room with curator Paul Collins and had the opportunity to handle a stone cylinder seal, clay cup, handmade brick and clay scythes. We compared the objects which are many thousands of years old to similar objects today and noticed similarities in design and function. Students were amazed to be able to handle such ancient objects as we imagined the lives of the people who had made and used them.

When we visited the gallery to invite students to choose one object to focus on, all of the students were instantly drawn to individual objects that was familiar and meaningful to them. One student asked to be shown all the objects from the part of the world he was from.

The depth of the students' personal response to objects in the gallery was an unexpected outcome. We didn't ask the students about their background or to talk about their lives, but they all chose something which looked exactly like a familiar object they had used. They wanted to talk about their memories of using a similar object in their own lives and experiences.

The class teacher summed up the session: 'it was interesting that lots of them were drawn to something that was familiar to them, something that might have a positive memory. I think that there was mutual learning that went on through the choices they made. I think everyone has something that they already bring into a gallery with them that's part of the experience of the gallery, what you already bring to the object and what you can learn about it.'

Students handled their chosen object- without wearing gloves as usually required by the Museum-to feel its texture and weight, explore its markings and consider how it might have been made and used. At school, students wrote a personal response to their object as a gallery label to share a different viewpoint about the object with visitors.

At their next visit to the Museum, we closed the gallery and students could hold their object before watching Paul put it and their label into the cases. This gave an opportunity to talk about the role of a curator and have a more general discussion about how museum objects are cared for and displayed. During this visit, photographer Ian Wallman took photographs of the students holding their object in the gallery. To protect the students' identities no photographs were taken showing faces.

We visited the school to play each student their recording and gather additional material from the students and teacher. Penny the edited the recordings to incorporate the new material. She worked with film editor Simon Owen who mixed the audio with the photographs and music.

The project ended with a celebratory event at the Museum for all involved and at which we were joined by additional students from the school. Everyone watched the films, the students were presented with certificates and we visited the gallery to see the objects in place.

Project outcomes

- Object labels in the gallery with each student's response to their object in their own words.
- Five films describing the students' experience, three of which are available online, created for the students as something they could take pride in to keep and share. Three are on the Museum's website. We hoped to have gallery labels translated into the students' own languages, but it wasn't possible in the initial stage of the project. The films, with one exception, include the students speaking in their own language.
- Photographs of the visit showing students handling objects.
- An unplanned object handing session with 25 students during a school visit.
- Deeper relationships with the students, teachers and the school. We hope to work together again on similar projects as a trusted partner.
- An audio summary and evaluation of the project including feedback from the students, teacher, curator and the Museum's learning team.

'When I hold the hand I feel amazing. I want to tell lots of friends about what I did at The Ashmolean Museum. I tell them about the hand and I tell them that I hold the hand. It is 1,000 years ago.... I tell them I'm happy with that.'
18 year old student

Watch the films at
www.ashmolean.org/voices-in-the-gallery

Key contacts
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https://www.ashmolean.org/learn

What did we learn?
Flexible and adaptable planning
Sessions often didn't go exactly to plan. The first visit had to be rescheduled and although the school had suggested morning visits to fit with their timetable, many of the students found it challenging to get to school in time. Subsequent sessions were planned for afternoons to allow for this. We never had the whole group of students each time and worked with who came on the day. We had an overall plan of where we were going, but after each visit we reviewed, adapted and adjusted the plan in the light of the students' interests and responses. New ideas emerged and were integrated during the project. For example we planned that the students could handle their objects in the gallery with the cases open then watch Paul put them and label in the case to see a curator at work.

Respect students' input
A lot of time was spent editing the audio recordings, handling the recorded material gathered over different sessions very sensitively, to respect the students' responses.

Give students control of their work
It was important to share the first versions of the audio material to check the students were happy with it and to give them the opportunity to make changes or add new material. The students had control over giving permission for their film to be shown on the website.

Protect students' identities
The school asked us to protect the students' anonymity and not to include names or faces in photographs. Initially, we wondered how this would work with photography, especially as the gallery is so dark. However, this became a positive limitation, as he resulting images show the essence of the work which was about people making connections with objects and the knowledge exchange that took place in conversations that happened around the objects. At the end of the project, the teacher thanked us for taking the privacy of the students so seriously.

Photograpy Ian Wallman Photography Ian Wallman
www.ianwallman.com