

# Northumbria Research Link

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## ***Art, Places and Environment***

### Making Communities and Making with Communities

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Thomas, J (2019) *Northumbria University students at Seaton Delaval Hall*

#### **ABSTRACT**

This presentation considers:

- Partnership roles between art schools and the heritage sector.
- The potential of artists in supporting communities, more broadly, to develop deeper understanding of shared heritage, their visibility within it, therefore themselves and their role in democratising (access to) heritage.
- How artists understand the role of communities in their practice, exploring place from different creative perspectives.

Drawing upon empirical data, the presentation reflects upon:

- Creative processes that consider inclusion and access, to directly engage students with 'audience', 'place' and 'environment'
- The application of reverse processes to facilitate and enable creative responses that develop fresh understanding, skills, and self-knowledge.

## **Introduction**

*Rising Stars* is a partnership between Northumbria University and the National Trust at Seaton Delaval Hall and forms part of *The Curtain Rises* project. The partnership is an opportunity for the National Trust to work collaboratively with students and give them valuable experience working across a range of areas in the heritage sector. Working with Northumbria University enables the National Trust to develop its community offer.

Using the *Rising Stars: Participation and Engagement* case study as an example of a wider partnership encouraging openness growth and creativity, this describes the journey of Level 4 BA Fine Art students and how partnership working can be adapted to address curriculum requirements, frame delivery, and support students to develop as socially engaged practitioners and to better understand context.

The *Rising Stars* Participation and Engagement brief has supported and recontextualised ways to engage with place, heritage, and environment, by offering innovative, practice-led approaches that inspire audience with different ways to access heritage & culture as participants. Using a 'Live Brief' as a tool to enhance research skills, promote collaboration and develop transferable 'soft skills', this gives positive examples of students creating connections and collaborations that support employability, activate creativity and expediate ownership of learning.

## **Partnership role between an art school and the heritage sector**

*Rising Stars* is a partnership between Northumbria University and the National Trust at Seaton Delaval Hall and forms part of *The Curtain Rises* project. The partnership is an opportunity for the National Trust to work collaboratively with students and give them valuable experience working across a range of areas in the heritage sector. Working with Northumbria University enables the National Trust to develop its community offer. From a community perspective this supports the notion of civic engagement; this is important for university ambitions and widening participation and access agendas (CHEAD 2022; Civic University Networks 2022; O'Malley 2020).

## **Wider considerations / benefits about partnership**

Over the past three years considerable learning has resulted; significantly, this shaped the writing of a new Level 4 Semester 2 **Participation and Engagement** module which places live brief activities centrally in the curriculum. This module further challenges, not only the students, but also the opportunities to develop a mutually beneficial programme in which bespoke learning activities result, extending the dialogue, engagement and participation. Supporting ongoing professional practice, the students are encouraged to consider different ways to creatively experience and access contemporary art and learn about exhibition and outreach processes; this real-world learning helps them explore broader questions relating to audience, ethics, professional skills, and safe working. This purposefully scaffolds learning to support students to work collaboratively and to facilitate understanding of how their creative ideas and responses could be adapted for others, including a younger age group.

## **Real-world learning / Live Brief**

The *Rising Stars* Participation and Engagement brief has supported and recontextualised ways to engage with place, heritage, and environment, by offering innovative, practice-led approaches that inspire audience with different ways to access heritage & culture as participants. Using a 'Live Brief' as a tool to enhance research skills, promote collaboration and develop transferable 'soft skills', this gives positive examples of students creating connections and collaborations that support employability, activate creativity and expediate ownership of learning.

The *Rising Stars* live brief challenged Level 4 (Year 1) undergraduate Fine Art students to create ideas for a new learning and engagement programme. The overarching aim was to develop learning materials (resources) that can inspire further activities and engagement; ideas that can be adapted and used to engage school groups with Seaton Delaval Hall. The brief offered students a chance to respond directly to the Hall as an intriguing and inspiring location; this also created opportunities for the students to collaborate and get to know one another whilst gaining experience in engagement and participation approaches.

[I]t's empowering for the students, who can explore different skills and roles and find they thrive in them, and leave their studies driven by values they've cultivated through their engagement work (Cloutterbuck 2021).

In the long-term, the module experiences develop the potential of artists in supporting communities, more broadly, to develop deeper understanding of shared heritage, their visibility within it, therefore themselves and their role in democratising (access to) heritage.

## **How artists understand the role of communities in their practice, exploring place from different creative perspectives**

*Creative thinkers and makers provide their communities with joy, interaction, and inspiration, but they also give thoughtful critique to our political, economic and social systems — pushing communities to engage thoughtfully and make steps toward social progress.*

(Artwork Archive, 2022)

*Culture and the experiences it offers can have a deep and lasting effect on places and the people who live in them.*

(Arts Council England, 2020)

Artist-led approaches offer a distinctive methodology towards community engagement; creating supportive environments and creative conditions that enable participants to create, investigate, reflect, and ultimately learn.

Learning about diverse ways contemporary art can engage different audiences' the Northumbria students were introduced to creative practitioners and professionals working in the cultural sector. The Live Brief invited the students to learn collaboratively with peers to devise and facilitate creative responses and activities

responding to a set thematic enquiry. Working in teams, they presented their learning to peers and the National Trust, as cultural partners as 'clients'.

The students were encouraged to consider different ways to creatively experience and access contemporary art. The aim of this was to support their ongoing professional practice; the students have learnt about exhibition and outreach processes, and explored broader questions relating to audience, ethics, professional skills, and safe working, safeguarding etc.

For their assessment, the students reflected upon their collaborative experience (their 'pitches' and the feedback given having presented their 'pitches') and personal experience, learning and development.

### **Creative processes that consider inclusion and access, to directly engage students with 'audience', 'place' and 'environment'**

The *Rising Stars: Participation and Engagement* offers a useful case study as an example of a wider partnership encouraging openness growth and creativity, this describes the journey of Level 4 BA Fine Art students and how partnership working can be adapted to address curriculum requirements, frame delivery, and support students to develop as socially engaged practitioners and to better understand context. The overarching aim was to develop learning materials (resources) that can inspire further activities and engagement; ideas that can be adapted and used to engage school groups with Seaton Delaval Hall. The brief offered students a chance to respond directly to the Hall as an intriguing and inspiring location; this also created opportunities for the students to collaborate and get to know one another whilst gaining experience in engagement and participation approaches. This was a crucial success in the project... even though they have just done this module in Semester 2, the students still didn't know each other very well and the group working aspect of the module and live brief requirements, positively, forced them to work together (in most cases)! Their feedback tells us they enjoyed this and got to know one another by working together. Through these activities the students were given opportunities to explore personal values and aspirations while working to an authentic live brief and working in collaboration with peers and the National Trust as external cultural sector partners. They also learnt about 'place' and 'environment' and gained insight into what it means to work in the cultural or heritage sectors; we have also introduced national Arts Council England Strategies, for example, *Let's Create*, to them and invited them to consider the wider implications and relevance of art. This demands a lot from Level 4 students, but the past 3 years gives evidence that they rise well to this challenge, and we have set very high expectations. All these activities support transferable 'soft' skills and helps the students gain a deeper understanding of contemporary art.

### **The application of reverse processes to facilitate and enable creative responses that develop fresh understanding, skills, and self-knowledge**

The external off campus activities have promoted leadership and independence. Enjoying the freedom and trust, that is integral to the live brief, the students have successfully devised a range of dynamic live and online workshops and activities; they have pitched these, with increasing confidence to the National Trust team. The collaborative aspect of the programme has positively supported employability skills and future pathways by creating new ways of thinking, alongside shared reflective practice, supporting students to become critical thinkers and strong independent life-long learners. The live brief has facilitated an inclusive situation of learning; the resulting activities have enhanced and highlighted the soft skills of students, including communication, teamwork, problem solving, and decisiveness, ability to work under pressure, time management, self-motivation, flexibility, negotiation, presentation skills, independent working, and experience of external engagement.

These approaches support a wider understanding of the subject and start to position the students' practice within it. They support the development of social, organisational, intellectual, and professional skills. They enhance learning in areas of communication, taking initiative, decision-making, problem solving, negotiation, critical reflection, and independent working. We are proud to share the third iteration of the live brief process produced a wide range of truly viable learning programmes. Selected pitches were shared with members of the Seaton Delaval Hall Teachers' Advisory Panel before final ideas were chosen for further development. These present a well-rounded, cross curricular offer for school groups and greatly increase the relationship with local schools as well as offering students networking opportunities and recognised work to add to their portfolios. The students have also been invited to facilitate some of these sessions and work with schools on a voluntary basis if they are interested (again this looks great on their CVs). We had a core group of first years who carried on working on the project last summer and gained lots from this.

## Conclusion

*I believe that the live brief was a wonderful experience which allowed me to connect with my peers by sharing ideas, it enabled me to gain new skills and develop existing skills.*

*I have learned that outreach activities are important in engaging any specific audience in the community as well as bringing knowledge and expertise to benefit both parties.*

This programme of study has evolved considerably over its three years of delivery as part of the Rising Stars project and the Level 4 Semester 2 **Participation and Engagement** module. This stakeholder partnership model further challenges and offers great and varied benefits, not only the students, but also the opportunities to develop a mutually beneficial programme in which bespoke learning activities result, extending the dialogue, engagement and participation. This is a Fine Art community building communities, both amongst the staff and students but also extending beyond the Seaton Delaval Hall and Northumbria University teams to a wider community of teachers, school staff and pupils. The legacy continues beyond the

Curtain Rises project, continually adding to, and improving, the learning offer at Seaton Delaval Hall.

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## Discussion and debate

To further explore the role of heritage and cultural sector and academic institutions in developing approaches to art education that not only develop artistic practice, soft skills but also the confidence and capability to work with communities to support democratising heritage and culture:

- **How can art schools / universities strengthen and promote cultural engagement and participation?**
- **How do site-specific and collaborative ways of working change perceptions and develop innovation?**
- **How can partnerships between art schools and heritage and cultural sector create space for students to understand the role of uncertainty and flexibility in developing their creative process and soft skills?**