

## Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

### Editorial

**Graham Barton, Academic Support Coordinator, UAL-wide Academic Support, Judy Willcocks, Head of CSM Museum and Study Collection and Sarah Mahurter, University Archives and Special Collections Centre Manager**

For this special issue of *Spark*, practitioners share experiences and perspectives on working with special collections at UAL for learning, teaching and research. The result is a collection of articles that draws attention to methodologies for engaging students with artefacts in their UAL context (collections, archives, the CSM museum and libraries) - and in particular the practices, decision-making processes and intentions underpinning these methodologies.

An editorial will often summarise the contribution that each article makes to the themes noted by the editor. However, sitting with this collection of articles for some weeks, the collection itself began to feel like a single artefact, although one with many overlapping throughlines. Rather than summarising the individual contribution of each article in turn - it seemed important to let the articles and their abstracts take on that role - I thought I would reflect on what the collection overall might tell us about what appears to be held in practitioners' and, therefore, perhaps, institutional mind.

When asked to review the collection, I also wondered whether it might be possible to approach the editorial as a collective interpretation, as these can often be more interesting than a single interpretation. With this in mind, I invited colleagues who had set up a Community of Practice around Object-Based Learning in 2015-17 to a recorded conversation about the articles selected for inclusion: Judy Willcocks, Head of the CSM Museum and Study Collection, and Sarah Mahurter, the Manager of the University Archives and Special Collections Centre.

What follows is a summary of themes that we identified and shared through discussion, coupled with extracts of that conversation to illustrate these observations. We have grouped the themes into 'pedagogic developments' - which in turn focus on critical practice, collaboration, decolonization and representation - and observations concerning where the field of writing, research and enquiry into Object-Based Learning (OBL) and related areas of interest could extend in future.

#### **Pedagogic developments and priorities: critical practice**

Curatorial, museological and library practices that use OBL are enabling wider agendas and outcomes, such as enhanced critical consciousness of the participants and practitioners who are instigating practice in these spaces. While there is an emphasis on the importance of active engagement (handling, play) as generative pedagogic practices, there is strong recognition of these spaces as sites of, and for, critical and radical practice.

We have talked before about the fact that we feel the forces acting on pedagogic practice and museological practice are actually quite similar. The preoccupations that motivate us include engagement with new technologies, the wellbeing of those we serve, concerns about representation and equality and the creation of spaces that are fair and safe.

(Willcocks, 2019)

There are articles in here about people coming to pedagogic practice feeling as though they're from the outside, and the quality and challenges that that brings to the debate is valuable because there's an outside view that's inherently different or challenging the norm and that's a good way of exposing, and trying to deal with the bias or the inherited practices that we are taught in our own professions. We bring those with us and try and challenge them in our practices, but having that outside voice helps us to do that, and some of these articles explore this quite strongly.

(Mahurter, 2019)

### **Pedagogic developments and priorities: decolonisation and representation**

This criticality extends to wider contexts, where the professional practices of all involved are subject to scrutiny, criticality and the potential for action.

For me the predominant theme of these articles was special collections as spaces where structural inequalities can be communicated or reproduced and how we as professionals might challenge that. At least one of the authors rightly suggests that the solution lies in changing the way that we collect, but a number of case studies went further, addressing the structures of collecting and suggesting ways that archival description, library cataloguing or even curation might become more representative practices. It was really interesting to me that decolonisation was such a strong, over-arching theme and that a lot of the projects – in a microcosmic way – were trying to find strategies for decolonising collections and the way they are interpreted.

(Willcocks, 2019)

I think a couple of the articles indicate that there is really no point in trying to define neutrality, because we can't. We can't be neutral, even though it's a principal of archival practice. The articles describing how archival cataloguing works state that that principal runs strongly through the professional practice of an archivist, [in] trying to describe a collection they try to be neutral. But we can't be neutral, no one ever is, so it brings up discussions of social justice and challenging status quo in all of our practices.

(Mahurter, 2019)

### **Pedagogic developments and priorities: collaborative practice**

The collaborations described in many of the articles indicate changing and evolving pedagogies both for traditional OBL practitioners (e.g. curators, museum educators), and for practitioners who are using and adapting OBL pedagogic practice to support or enhance existing teaching practices. For example, some articles look at ways in which collections and archives can support contemporary teaching practices such as gamification (Sampson), reading groups (Grandal Montero and Patel), and project- or enquiry-based learning.

These collaborations and connections also indicate a strong emergent outcome of Object-Based Learning pedagogy – that artefacts and collections can provide a compelling focus for collaboration among practitioners, and a stimulus for enhancing and adapting signature pedagogies already in place. In turn, this results in multi-faceted experiences for students and further ways to enhance student learning.

A key theme that emerged for me was the notion of play and playfulness - a number of these articles explored the possibility of utilising special collections to support learning and teaching in ways that reduce anxiety, creating spaces for students to try and fail and not feel like they're being judged by their peers or their teaching staff. [...] I think that's a really positive thing to take away in terms of pedagogic development.

(Willcocks, 2019)

The archives and collections become sites for independent and interdependent learning - whether that's learning about yourself and your own responses (and what that tells you); or whether it's engaging critically with material culture emerging from that experience - and sites for developing existing forms of pedagogy.

(Barton, 2019)

### **Concluding thoughts**

The overall impression is one of a strong commitment and engagement with the possibilities that objects, archives and collections lend to support teaching in, and for, creative contexts, as well as in non-arts contexts. Similarly, this engagement enables new forms of pedagogic practice to emerge from collaborations and connections for all involved. It is important to recognise that almost all of the articles were written by curators, archivists and librarians who were utilising pedagogic practices to enhance their work and find more inclusive ways of engaging students. Further *Spark* articles might usefully explore further the voices of students, learning development specialists, academic staff, teaching staff and technicians who engage with special collections as a means of enhancing their (pedagogic) practice and sharing disciplinary knowledge. The provocation pieces and research papers also engage with wider educational contexts, indicating further possibilities for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary practice, and for purposes and intentions around pedagogic practice to become further revealed and shared.

### **References**

Mahurter, S. and Willcocks, J. (2019) Interview with Sarah Mahurter and Judy Willcocks. Interviewed by Graham Barton, 23 April.