**Chapter X: Good practice case study: Diversifying the curriculum and engaging students through archives and object handling**

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‘Objects, although concrete, actually represent a vast continuum of abstract ideas and inter-related realities’ (Falk, 2002: x). This is just one reason why objects in museum collections have been used for educational purposes, not only in informal settings, but also in higher education. This chapter discusses the delivery in 2016 of a small project at University College London (UCL) called ‘Diversifying the curriculum: A staff-student partnership to select archival material and objects for use in teaching and learning across two faculties’. The project sought to identify and digitise new archival sources as well as to select a range of objects for use in the teaching of two new undergraduate history modules across two faculties: UCL Institute of Education and UCL History Department. While existing literature mainly focuses on teaching with objects in a museum setting, this project used more everyday items from the twentieth-century history of charity and youth in Britain to compile a ‘curated teaching collection’ of objects and digitised documents for use in higher education teaching.

Three key motivations lay behind our desire to develop new teaching and learning resources for these modules. First, we wanted to ensure that the history curriculum we asked students to engage with better reflected not only the diversity of the student body at UCL, but also the experiences and perspectives of a more diverse range of people in the past. Second, we sought to enhance experiential learning and by so doing, ensure that course content was fully accessible to students with different learning styles. Third, we wanted to promote student engagement and student-centred learning by including students in the initial project, and in the planning and delivery of the modules into which it fed.

The Diversifying the Curriculum project comprised:

* research to identify, select and digitise new archival sources
* the compilation of a small thematic object handing collection
* workshops with undergraduate students to test out these resources and design teaching activities for the forthcoming academic year.

The archive collections consulted were the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (held in the Newsam Archive at UCL Institute of Education), the Black Cultural Archives, the Children’s Society Archive, the Hall Carpenter Archive and the Child Poverty Action Group (both held at London School of Economics). Research in these archives identified a range of primary sources dating from 1914-1985 that included hand-written testimony from LGBT+ young people, papers from black youth clubs, reports of experimental youth work with Asian girls, campaigning material and ephemera from gay rights and anti-poverty campaigners and material on feminist approaches to work with young people. In particular, we worked closely with the Children’s Society’s archives and records management team to anonymise and digitise the full case files of five girls who had been in residential care in the early twentieth century. The object handling collection was purchased via online marketplaces and supplemented by personal donations. It contains a range of small objects representing the material culture of charity, voluntary organisations and youth movements in twentieth-century Britain. While not always common now, many of the objects are of a more everyday nature than many of the museum objects typically thought of as teaching tools. Items included uniform and flags from the Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, Woodcraft Folk and Boys’ Brigade, First World War fundraising flags, CND and WRVS pin badges, World Refugee Year stamps, Youth Hostel Association memorabilia, 1950s Civil Defence armbands, charity collecting boxes and a wooden tea tray made by blind ex-servicemen after the First World War.

In line with UCL’s Connected Curriculum aim of engaging students as partners in their education, and seeing students as co-producers of knowledge alongside staff members, we worked with a small group of undergraduates to select and arrange the material. We recognised that students come from very different national and international backgrounds, and may engage in different ways and bring different perspectives to bear on the same material. Two participatory workshops, each lasting an hour and a half, were organised with small groups of students studying history or education. Students were a self-selected group who responded to a circular email sent to all History undergraduates and all BA Education Studies students, and were paid for their participation. At these sessions students were invited to handle objects, examine documents and offer feedback and suggestions for classroom activities. We elicited feedback via full group discussion, one-to-one conversations between students and staff and by collating students’ written comments, notes and drawings. The sessions were not audio recorded but one workshop was filmed to provide material for a YouTube video about the project (see link at end of the chapter). Students were fully engaged in the workshop tasks, offering personal perspectives on the resources presented that were in some cases contradictory. However, being part of students’ discussion and seeing where they disagreed was illuminating.

University College London attracts a range of students from different backgrounds, including a high proportion of international students. In particular, the BA in Education Studies – a multidisciplinary degree programme established in 2011 – has a very diverse intake that is majority female, contains a very high proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students and includes a significant minority of mature students. In addition, modules on the programme are popular with Erasmus exchange students. In UK higher education more generally, it is now the case that there are more female than male undergraduates and that one in four students identify themselves as something other than white (HEFCE, 2014). In view of such diversity, there is now growing recognition across disciplines of the need for a more inclusive curriculum. At UCL, the Liberating the Curriculum (LTC) working group is a group of staff and students which aims ‘to challenge traditional Eurocentric, male-dominated curricula and to ensure the work of marginalised scholars on race, sexuality, gender and disability are fairly represented in curricula’ (UCL Teaching and Learning, 2016). Our own research interests also reflect this agenda and are thus inextricably linked to a wider commitment to promoting more inclusive teaching. Teaching using objects, as recognised by Dierking (2002) involves engaging with the personal context factors and sociocultural context of learners who undertake object-based learning and this too has helped this work to counter dominant narratives.

There is a particular problem when teaching histories that have hitherto focussed on a narrower group of people. The history and historiography of youth movements, for example, have had an emphasis on problematic youth and the experiences of white male teenagers. In the history of voluntary organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) the voices of beneficiaries and young people are hard to find. Such silences hinder understanding of the topic in hand, but they also fail to offer students the opportunity to feel that they are fully represented in the subjects they are being taught. This was reflected in informal feedback from the first cohort of students taking the youth module, who wanted to learn about the experiences of a more diverse range of young people in the past, particularly about Black and Asian youth in Britain. Similarly, voluntary organisations and NGOs have worked with the most marginalised social groups – including people with disabilities, vulnerable children, lone parents and older people – as well as providing important opportunities for the self-realisation and liberation of many marginalised sections of society. Yet, the actual experiences of many such groups are neglected in the secondary literature, while access to relevant primary sources remains limited. In the rest of this chapter we offer some reflections on this project. The key themes we discuss include reflecting the diversity of the student body, capturing stories from those least often heard, accommodating a range of learning styles, promoting student engagement and co-creating curricula.

**New archival sources**

Through research to identify new primary sources from a number of different archives, we were able to present students with multiple stories that brought BAME, queer, disabled and feminist perspectives to the fore. We presented students at the workshops with a large number of such new sources, inviting them to tell us what stories spoke to them and which they found compelling. The results were a timely reminder that from our standpoint as teaching staff, the sources we think best reflect the themes of a topic may not be the ones that will appeal most to our students. It also confirmed for us that showing a diverse student body examples of people they identified more closely with had the potential to increase engagement and improve learning outcomes.

The personal stories of people whose voices are hardest to find in the historical record proved most engaging for students, including handwritten accounts from gay teenagers about coming out in the 1970s and letters written by young girls living in the Children’s Society homes in the 1930s. However, handwritten accounts from the past can provide a barrier to student engagement by being difficult to read. Students at the workshop liked being able to see two versions – a transcript or printed version was more readable, but the handwritten version evoked a more emotional response based on a belief that it offered a more direct link with the voice of the young person. Providing digested copies of the handwritten original alongside transcripts allowed students to better imagine the circumstances of the document’s creation.

Another point of discussion revolved around the length of primary source extracts. A number of the extracts prepared for students were parts of longer reports with each sample running to five or six pages. These were rich textual sources, but we feared that students would reject them for being too long. Some did feel this, but others, having taken the time to read them, were very enthusiastic about their potential. They felt that being given them in advance might help slower readers, aid preparation of a considered response and also give more time for in-class discussion. In contrast, another student enjoyed reading them and giving an immediate response and felt time should be set aside for this during seminars. These diverging viewpoints could be seen as problematic, but we have used them to inform a better understanding of how this material might be received and where to fit it into the modules. Similarly to our fears about students being reluctant to decipher handwriting, we were reassured that with the proper tools and support students valued the opportunity to access a broad range of documents.

The project has also helped students engage with the specific requirements of studying history at undergraduate level. This has been especially important on the BA in Education Studies where history forms only one of several disciplinary perspectives that students encounter during their degrees. Many students reported that they come to the history modules with preconceived ideas shaped by negative experiences of the school history curriculum and its failure to reflect their lives. When students use archival sources, even in digitised form, it helps them to ‘do’ history and to link this material with the core secondary reading. We have now digitised case files from the Children’s Society archives which are the very same ones used by an academic, Pamela Cox, in preparing her book on gender, justice and welfare. Enabling students to cross-reference the secondary text with the original primary sources promotes research-based learning, while the voices of the working-class girls and young women they contain capture students’ imaginations.

**Objects**

In examining the curricular use of objects, Quave & Meister (2016:1-2) note that thematic collections are ‘useful for promoting cross-cultural, international, and interdisciplinary perspectives’. Meecham (2015: 77-94) too recognises the potential of objects to aid in internationalising the curriculum. Therefore compiling a new curated collection of objects sources is an appropriate approach to support efforts to ‘liberate the curriculum’ on these history modules. Furthermore, physical objects can provide very tangible links to the past, allowing students to think about the experiences of those who might have used or worn the objects, but whose stories might not have been captured or survived in written form.

Trialling object handling in workshops helped us see how students made use of them and elicited useful feedback about how these might fit into the modules when taught. Object handling stimulated students to think about the context from which the object emerged and prompted discussion of key themes. For example, examining the original 8” vinyl Band Aid single ‘Do they know it’s Christmas?’ from 1984 alongside a Dr Barnardo’s branded toy car resulted in workshop attendees starting a spontaneous discussion about how fundraising practices had changed in twentieth-century Britain. An exercise like this, which allowed ideas to emerge without tutor-direction and then be linked back to core module themes, worked well for students unfamiliar with the topic. Accordingly, this exercise has been placed at the start of the module, with relevant objects brought along again in subsequent weeks to continue these high levels of student engagement. The engagement with the material culture of voluntary action which lies at the heart of the course is also reflected in assessment, with an ‘object report’ set as the first assignment. This works to reinforce experiential learning in phases in a way similar to that outlined by Kolb (1984).

The sensory experience of handling objects in class allows us to engage students in different types of learning. In particular, somatic and embodied learning (Matthews, 1998) are promoted by having objects present in the classroom during most sessions of course teaching. Bringing touch, sound and smell into the classroom alongside more traditional techniques such as reading and small group discussion provides an alternative way of accessing the course content and supports students’ learning. Objects allow a direct, tangible and multisensory link to the past and allow students to feel that they are encountering an ‘authentic’ piece of the past, even when they understand that this authenticity is mediated. Using objects is thus a key way to support personal meaning-making and deeper conceptual understandings (Meyer & Land, 2005). The everyday and familiar nature of the objects selected is also useful in making the topic accessible and in increasing engagement with topics under study. Object handling is also linked to long-term retention of ideas and concepts, and research has shown that a majority of students surveyed, across a range of disciplines, thought object-based learning was a more effective method of learning than a lecture or talk alone (Sharp, Thomson, Chatterjee & Hannan, 2015: 97-116). The appeal of object-based learning to different learning styles is summed up well by Chatterjee, Hannan & Thomson (2015:7-8) who say that:

“Whilst it is likely that individuals will have a preference for one or more learning styles, the value of object-based learning is that it affords the learner opportunities to engage with knowledge in multiple ways, using multiple modalities and thus accommodating a range of different styles and individual preferences.”

The curated object teaching collection we produced has a number of advantages which make it useful in undergraduate teaching. It is a portable and accessible collection that can be taken into the classroom. Thus it avoids some of the pitfalls identified by Cain (2010). Once assembled, this type of collection creates fewer time and resource demands on the tutor than organising museum visits, and we were fortunate to have a small grant to cover the costs of the initial curation. Students also have the advantage of being able to interact with the objects regularly throughout their module as the collection, or relevant parts of it, are brought to each session, and can be seen during tutor’s office hours. This makes it a very accessible teaching resource, as do digitised archives which are uploaded to the virtual learning environment. The collection promotes both research-led teaching (as it is compiled by research-active teaching staff for a specific module) and research-based teaching (enabling students to conduct research through object reports). Unlike in museums, in a curated teaching collection objects are specifically selected to mirror a module’s topics and themes and are presented together with an inventory and suggested reading. The collection fully supports course delivery, and it can do so year after year.

**Conclusion**

The ‘diversifying the curriculum project’ offers two areas where we seek to advance good practice in teaching and learning. Firstly, compiling a curated collection of objects and digital archives we see as development from largely museum-based approaches to teaching using objects in higher education. As such it offers a way of working that is low-cost, and available to colleagues at universities without the rich museum collections that UCL is fortunate to possess. It offers a portable, accessible opportunity for students to engage with material culture that is woven into curriculum design, and was compiled to broaden diversity, promote inclusion and support a range of learning styles. Finally, the staff-student partnership approach enables students to be involved in shaping the content of their curriculum. Student ideas on diversity and learning styles have been taken seriously and embedded into module design. Student responses to the new material are being gathered and will continue to inform the development of the curriculum.

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To view workshop with one-to-one conversations between students and staff and by collating students’ written comments, notes and drawings.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w76lCnN1xmw&feature=youtu.be&yt:cc=on>