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Carnell, Brent, Fung, Dilly

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Curating connections in the art history curriculum

Nicholas Grindle and Ben Thomas

The act of curating, at its most basic, is about connecting. (Obrist 2015: 1)

Introduction

In recent years ‘connecting’ has proven a powerful way of rethinking how people learn in educational settings, including in both universities and museums. The teacher’s or curator’s job is not to impart information but to make it possible for the learner to construct their own understanding of the topic.

Constructivist pedagogy now dominates discussion of formal education. Its impact on curating has been slower to emerge but is proving to be equally profound. In his widely-cited sketch of the ‘constructivist museum’, George Hein noted that:

the logical structure for any subject matter and the way it is presented to the viewer depend not on the characteristics of the subject or on the properties of the objects on display, but on the educational needs of the visitor. (Hein 1999: 76–7)

Galleries and art collections have been viewed as less concerned with transmitting authoritative views than museums (Pringle 2006: 7–9) and less has been written about the impact that constructivist pedagogy might have in these areas. Sue Cross and Emily Pringle, writing
independently about learning in galleries and from different perspectives and backgrounds, each draw attention to themes that feature prominently in any discussion of constructivist education: learning as a facilitated process, the need to understand the needs and habits of individual learners, the importance of learning in a social setting and the role of co-construction, the generation of multiple interpretations and the testing of those interpretations against the visual evidence (Pringle 2006; Cross 2009: 143–52).

Curating offers one model for conceiving how the university curriculum can shape a student’s engagement with the subject in a way that leads to the generation of meaning not only for the student but also for her companions, including the teacher. As Hans Ulrich Obrist notes, ‘The act of curating at its most basic is simply about connecting ... the task of curating is to create junctions, to allow different elements to touch’ (Obrist 2015: 1).

But a crucial question emerges at this point. Who is making the connections? In other words, who is the curator? The shifts in understanding and practice of curating described above point to the emergence of a new model of personalised learning in a curriculum that is curated by the student. Raphael Hallet has noted how the emergence in recent years of a highly social, image-based digital environment means that students come to university with spaces of curation and display already quite well honed (Hallett 2016). It would be a mistake, however, to think that this means we should give the curriculum entirely over to students. Hallet’s point is that curating is crucial because in its revised form it models the co-creation of knowledge: it describes the partnership between those with expert subject knowledge and those ‘digital natives’ who are already expert in visualising knowledge to build their own understanding of the subject in new and exciting ways. This in turn leads to the exciting prospect that students are able to take their experience of digital curation and managing an online identity and work with subject experts in presenting the outcomes of their collaboration to an outside audience.

The best way to explore how curation works as a means of knowledge co-creation is to look in detail at an example: art historian, curator and print specialist Ben Thomas’s partnership with students to co-curate the Kent Print Collection at the University of Kent. In this chapter we consider why Ben’s work has proven so successful, and what it tells us about students as curators of their own curricula – and, in particular, of the ways that students learn to produce outputs directed at an audience.
Curating as a model for learning

If curating offers a model for thinking about how researchers and students work together to make connections between different subjects, between university and the workplace, and between assessed work and external audiences, it also offers a history on which these ambitions can draw. Curating increasingly describes the practice not only of the gallery professional, but also of the artist themselves as well as the visitor. It is therefore not surprising that contemporary art has shown a great deal of interest in forms of engagement, such as collecting and display, that pre-date the establishment in the nineteenth century of large galleries and museums that enshrined a grand narrative of a nation’s progress. In the words of one university-based curator: ‘Traditional audiences [...] expect you to be the one who knows everything. That’s not how it works in higher education’ (Willcocks 2016; our italics).

Some of the characteristics of pre-modern museums, such as their capacity to provide a fully embodied experience where the visitor can feel and handle the objects, and the organisation of space around a central area for study, have re-emerged in university museums as part of what might be called the ‘curricular turn’ that started in the United States in the late 1990s and is expressed in the UK as ‘object-based learning’. Universities in the United States witnessed a growth in campus-based museums in the second half of the twentieth century, fuelled in large part by private bequests and donations. Subsequent funding for outreach to schools and the local community has recently been matched by funding for work with students and staff within the university (Bradley 2009). Dedicated spaces, variously named ‘study centres’, ‘study galleries’, ‘object study rooms’, ‘teaching exhibition galleries’, ‘laboratories’, have been created to help staff and students engage more closely with objects, including works of art (Hammond 2006; Tishman, McKinney and Straughn 2007; Bradley 2009). The emphasis has been on a partnership between study centre curators, staff teaching their discipline, and students, to turn a space traditionally associated with the authoritative communication of grand narrative into a more student-centred environment, and going some way to realising Hein’s vision of a constructivist museum.

University museums in the United Kingdom have developed in different circumstances to those in the US, and here greater attention has been paid to the pedagogical benefits of ‘object-based learning’. The scholarship of object-based learning has been pioneered at UCL and is in its early stages, but its investigations have suggested that learning with objects is an effective way of
realising two key conditions of effective learning as set out in constructivist pedagogy: turning learning from an individual to a social experience, and broadening the focus from cognitive activity alone, to include a wider range of skills and competencies (Chatterjee, Hannan and Thomson 2015). These findings echo what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have written about ‘situated learning’ and how ‘opportunities for learning are, more often than not, given structure by work practices instead of by strongly asymmetrical master-apprentice relations’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, 93). This is borne out by case studies of students learning about objects through learning to be curators. For example, Alexandra Woodall observed that when students were confronted with an uncurated collection they were obliged to learn about how museums worked in order to make sense of objects whose meaning and significance was obscure because they had not been classified (Woodall 2015). These findings suggest that rather than putting people off, curatorial practices are a key way in which learning can be made meaningful through the situations in which it takes place. In our opinion this nicely captures the ways in which curating offers a very practical model for thinking about how researchers and students might use a connected curriculum to forge connections between different subjects, practices and audiences.

Educational research offers strong support for the efficacy of student curating as a model for promoting complex and authentic learning. Elizabeth McDowell’s analysis of an art history module where students curated an online exhibition showed it was almost unique among a large number of projects in meeting all six of their criteria for how assessment can support learning (McDowell et al. 2006: 14). They noted that curating as a mode of learning was successful because it:

- emphasises authenticity and complexity in content and methods of assessment;
- uses high-stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly;
- provides opportunities to practise prior to summative assessment;
- is rich in feedback derived from formal mechanisms;
- provides a continuous flow of informal feedback on ‘how they are doing’; and
- presents opportunities to direct and evaluate one’s own learning.

McDowell’s findings are echoed by others (Knight and Yorke 2003: 83; Grindle and Fredericksen 2010; for a student perspective see Littlewood and Wyatt-Livesley 2016).
Theories of learning seem to offer powerful support for the efficacy of curating as a means of connecting the curriculum and this is backed up by the evidence from case studies. As long ago as 2007 educators and curators in the US were discussing curating initiatives under the title ‘Curricular connections’. It therefore comes as a shock to find that curators do not have many positive things to say about student cura-
tion. Bringing in students as full partners has been described as a ‘tricky proposition’ that is ‘difficult to pull off’ (Bradley 2009). Janet Marstine’s analysis of ideal learning experience for student curators describes the process as ‘messy’, in a bid to acknowledge the unrehearsed and risky but potentially rewarding nature of such projects (Marstine 2007). Marstine observes that the examples cited by the literature as a resound-
ing success can be found exclusively in ‘elite private colleges with signi-
cificant funding for pedagogical initiatives’ (for an example, see Rodgers 2015) and suggests that one reason for the success of projects at these institutions is that they are able to offer small funds for the purchase of prints or photographs to be used in exhibitions that will be added to the permanent collection (Marstine 2007).

What follows is an account of the Kent Print Collection project and the related Print Collecting and Curating module at the University of Kent from the perspective of its convener Ben Thomas. As Ben shows, involving students in the formation of the collection and linking this to a structured curatorial project has proved to be a means of successfully negotiating some of the challenges identified in earlier attempts to use curating as a means of connecting the curriculum.

### Connecting the curriculum with the Kent Print Collection

The Kent Print Collection was established during the summer of 2005 when, with extraordinary beginner’s luck, Ben purchased from the art dealer P. Y. Chin in London’s Portobello Market an impression of *Christ and the Adulteress*, an engraving made in 1575 by the first female printmaker Diana of Mantua, working after a design by Raphael’s pupil Giulio Romano. During a period of study leave Ben noticed that the prices for Old Master prints had dropped and that he was able to acquire works of art by artists that he was researching. This got Ben thinking about how putting together a small collection of museum-standard prints might prove a rewarding exercise for his students. Since taking Kent’s Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education programme Ben had been wrestling with the problem of how Art History might be taught in ways
that were ‘student-centred’ and which fostered ‘deep learning’ by involving students in an active process of discovery (Ramsden 2003). Working in a School of Arts alongside colleagues in Drama and Film he could see how practice-based learning, whether performance or filmmaking, fitted naturally into the programmes they taught, tapping into the creativity of students to enhance their learning. Perhaps collecting, and then curating the results of that collecting, could be the art historical equivalent? Fortunately, the then Head of the School of Arts, Professor Jill Davies, saw the potential in this idea and allotted £1,000 towards beginning the collection – leading to the acquisition of the Diana of Mantua along with 14 other prints. Ben then designed the module Print Collecting and Curating, putting the module specifications through the necessary learning and teaching committees, not without some searching questions about the viability and nature of the experiment proposed. This module is now in its tenth year, and ran for the sixth time in Spring 2017 with over 30 students enrolled. The module is very demanding on Ben’s time and so does not run every year.

Students begin the module by studying the existing print collection to identify its strengths and weaknesses, learning about print techniques and the history of printmaking in the process. By using the associated ‘handling collection’ – several hundred genuine prints of low monetary value used for training students how to identify print techniques – this is a fully interactive process. Then, working individually or in small groups of two or three, they write an exhibition proposal containing a rationale, budget and proposed list of loans and purchases (30 per cent of the overall grade). Not only must the proposed exhibition be art historically rigorous, it has to be inspiring and accessible to a wider public, and also feasible logistically within tight budgetary and time constraints – the students face the formidable challenge of putting on a show with £3,000 in a little over three months. The exhibition proposals that receive a first-class grade, judged against these criteria, are then presented at a class meeting or ‘hustings’, where the students as a group vote to adopt one winning proposal. This means that students effectively choose the subject of the module, and therefore that the lecturer’s role is more about advising and training than simply delivering module content.

Once an exhibition proposal has been adopted the pace of the module shifts with classes resembling focused business meetings with agendas that reflect the interlocking deadlines that suddenly loom large. Typically the group splits into three: a curating team which develops the exhibition concept, identifying potential loans and purchases, and
carrying out research and interviews; a marketing team which tackles design tasks (posters, websites, the form of the catalogue) and publicity (press releases, social media, education programmes); and a finance team which manages the budget, negotiates purchases of prints, fundraises, deals with copyright issues and insurance, and handles logistical arrangements such as transport. Every aspect of the winning proposal is analysed and often rethought and reformulated, with good ideas from other proposals being integrated into the project. Frequently the work of one group will stall while another group attempts to resolve a problem: for example, the marketing team cannot produce a basic exhibition design to go on banners, posters and websites until the curating team have decided the exhibition’s title and chosen a leading image, and the finance team have then secured permission and paid any reproduction fee for the use of that image. Working through the sometimes complex ramifications of their decision-making processes, the students learn the value of teamwork and how to be creative while negotiating real constraints. They learn to accept constructive criticism in the spirit in which it is offered, and to be respectful of each other’s opinions. Often mistakes are made – for example, a large banner for the exterior of the gallery was once printed with a costly spelling error that proof-readers had missed – but each mistake is a learning opportunity. This is undoubtedly the most demanding and stressful part of the process and it is here that the support and experience of the teacher on the module, and also of the partners we work with, is most telling.

After the list of works of art in the exhibition has been finalised, the delivery date for loans has been fixed, prints have been sent to the framers, the catalogue delivered to the printer, and the invitations to the private view have been sent out, the module then enters a more reflective stage with students working on their Log Books (40 per cent of the overall grade). These contain analytical sections on the art historical significance of the exhibition, but also self-reflective passages that consider the skills developed through the experience of working on it. Students document their own individual contributions to the project, which might include drafting press releases, interviewing artists, writing catalogue entries, arranging the transport of artworks, or sending emails and visiting galleries as part of loan negotiations. The next major task is the installation of the exhibition – now held in the University of Kent’s Studio 3 Gallery, but before 2010 in Keynes College and at the Museum of Canterbury. At this point the curating team usually finds that the careful plans made for the hang, which at first were balsa wood architectural models but now use 3D
digital imaging, do not match the experience of arranging the works in the actual gallery space. Working with the Kent Estates team the students direct the hang and the lighting, and install other additional elements such as vitrines or stencilled lettering on walls. The private view is a celebratory occasion filled with justifiable pride at achieving a remarkable feat, but it is not the end of the module. The exhibition has to be invigilated, events and educational visits are arranged, and then finally the borrowed works need to be returned and the gallery cleared. The students all receive the same mark for the exhibition considered as a whole (20 per cent of the overall grade), a sometimes controversial feature of the module but one which motivates teamwork, and which is mitigated by a grade for individual contribution to the project (10 per cent of the overall grade).

To date five exhibitions have been organised as a result of running the Print Collecting and Curating module, and three further exhibitions were arranged by students in closely related but extra-curricular work. The Kent Print Collection’s inaugural exhibition was curated by 11 undergraduate students working voluntarily with the 14 prints purchased in 2005 that made up the fledgling collection.

The first time that the Print Collecting and Curating module ran in Spring Term 2007 it resulted in the exhibition *Dreams and Nightmares*, held first on the university campus and then at the Museum of Canterbury (Thomas 2007). Here a larger group of 20 students worked together to develop the exhibition concept from an initial proposal devised by one member of the group, Claire Inglis. Thematic exhibitions have proved popular with student curators as they allow for a relatively wide range of prints to be selected, hence ensuring flexibility when delivering an exhibition to a tight deadline while also appealing to a broad audience.

Reacting against the rather sombre imagery of *Dreams and Nightmares*, the next group of 21 students to take the Print Collecting and Curating module adopted a proposal about humour in prints that led to the exhibition *The Art of Comedy* (held in 2008 on campus and at the Museum of Canterbury) (Thomas 2008). In developing the exhibition concept students were able to draw on research carried out in Kent’s Drama department, with the expert in stand-up comedy Oliver Double bringing them quickly up to speed on the history and theory of comedy. In this way the development of an exhibition proposal led naturally to interdisciplinary exchanges.

The next exhibition based on the Kent Print Collection occurred in 2010 and took place in Studio 3 Gallery in the Jarman Building, the newly built home of Kent’s School of Arts. This large ‘white cube’ style
gallery is perhaps Canterbury’s most impressive exhibition space, and seemed to demand a shift in scale and ambition. The 22 students taking the module decided to focus on contemporary art in order to develop an area of relative weakness in the collection, and also in reaction to the prevailing Old Master feel of previous exhibitions. The criteria for including artists in this show was that they had some connection with the county of Kent, and this led to an eclectic and revealing show that brought together a roster of artists that included Frank Auerbach, Peter Blake and Michael Craig-Martin. The knowingly kitsch title *Krikey! Kentemporary Prints* marked a different style of curating on the part of the students: less British Museum and more Saatchi Gallery (Chan 2010). This show also witnessed a move away from purchases and towards loans, with the majority of works on display lent by leading commercial galleries. The exhibition was insured for over £250,000, showing that the students’ artistic interests and ambition were not matched by the £3,000 budget they had to operate with. Nevertheless, they were able to fundraise to acquire prints by artists such as Ian Davenport and Tracey Emin for the collection. Impressed by the energy and purpose of the students, the artist Humphrey Ocean RA generously lent from his own collection and opened the exhibition.

Two further student-curated exhibitions were included in the Studio 3 Gallery schedule: *Double Take: The Art of Printmaking* in 2012, and *Underexposed: Female Artists and the Medium of Print* in 2014. The earlier exhibition happened because Professor Jo Stockham of the Royal College of Art invited our students to explore the RCA’s impressive collection of prints. The second exhibition, *Underexposed*, grew out of an exhibition proposal that had been developed for the Print Collecting and Curating module: a proposal that recognised the curious fact that while the first print purchased for the collection was made by a woman, and all of the subsequent acquisitions were made by largely female undergraduates for specific exhibition projects, the Kent Print Collection had unintentionally reproduced the gender bias in favour of male artists that is so evident in more established art collections (Chiverton and Dickens 2014). It was also a landmark show for Studio 3 Gallery in being the first ever to be supported by a loan from a national museum, the V&A, prompting a national security inspection of the gallery, and a chance for the students to participate in the rigorous loan procedures required at this level.

The diversity of themes tackled by students was further demonstrated by the fifth Kent Print Collection exhibition, which took place in 2013 when 22 students developed an exhibition on fame and
the obsession with celebrities, evident in art inspired by Andy Warhol. The sixth and most recent exhibition of the Kent Print Collection took place in 2015 and was inspired by a Philosophy of Art module taught at Kent by Hans Maes entitled ‘Exposed: The Aesthetics of the Body, Sexuality and Erotic Art’. Students who had taken this module wanted to explore, by curating an exhibition of prints, the philosophical question of whether sexually explicit imagery could be defined as art. The resulting exhibition was titled Beautifully Obscene: The History of the Erotic Print and raised obvious challenges for the student curators which they met by deftly avoiding sensationalism and maintaining high scholarly standards (with catalogue essays commissioned from leading researchers in the field of erotic art).

In devising the module Print Collecting and Curating Ben hoped to foster ‘deep learning’ in Art History through the practice-based activities of collecting and curating. To this end he was keen for the exhibition exercise not to be a simulation but to involve real works of art. What he did not anticipate was how opening up the module beyond the classroom would give it a real momentum of its own, stimulating academic enquiry that is genuinely interdisciplinary and enquiry-led and which also led students to develop practical skills such as fundraising, managing a budget and negotiating (to name but three). Connecting academic learning with workplace learning has afforded many students their first experience of the type of work that they might pursue as a career. What has made it so effective is that it results from experiences that are integral to the teaching of Art History and is not simply an additional emphasis on ‘transferable skills’; anecdotal evidence suggests it carries more impact with employers than generic skills training.

The catalogues published by students have attracted positive reviews in leading journals dedicated to print studies, such as Print Quarterly and Printmaking Today, and were described in 2012 by Art in Print as ‘exemplary’. Exemplary, that is, as print scholarship, not as student work. The fact that students will graduate from the module as published authors has certainly motivated them to raise the quality of their writing, aware that they are leaving a lasting legacy and not simply turning in an essay. The legacy issue is felt more broadly by students taking the module, with each new class of students determined to maintain the standards established by their predecessors and to leave the collection enhanced. In this way a virtuous circle operates with each cohort of students learning from past classes and nurturing future learning. From the teacher’s point of view there is enormous satisfaction to be had from students thinking beyond the short-term goal of meeting an
essay deadline and believing that their studies will have an impact in the wider world and acting accordingly.

Finally, it is worth mentioning how the Print Collecting and Curating module and the Kent Print Collection have had a wider impact on the curriculum at Kent. Other practice-based modules have been developed involving photography, drawing, visual arts writing and internships in professional organisations. Prints from the collection are also routinely used in teaching more traditional modules, for example on Renaissance or Baroque art. The decision of the School of Arts to invest in a gallery space when it moved into the Jarman Building in 2010 was in large part due to the potential for enhancing educational attainment demonstrated by the Print Collecting and Curating module. The gallery’s programme has involved a number of high profile artists, and this in turn has led to generous donations to the print collection – for example, Art & Language gave a set of their Maps to Indicate… prints following an exhibition in Studio 3 Gallery in 2011. An MA Curating was established four years ago, where postgraduate curators participate in a year-long curating project modelled on the Print Collecting and Curating module but not confined to prints. At the time of writing, the current exhibition in Studio 3 Gallery is Curio: Sites of Wonder, a contemporary meditation on the cabinet of curiosities, which was curated by the MA team – two of whom graduated from the undergraduate curating module. Even the ‘handling collection’ is now employed in the assessment of applicants during recruitment or ‘UCAS’ days in ‘speed curating’ exercises that have replaced formal interviews. Drawing ultimately on the imagination and creativity of students, the Kent Print Collection project has grown organically, forging unexpected and exciting connections across the curriculum and beyond.

Conclusion

The foregoing outline of the Print Collecting and Curation module shows how it meets all the points identified by McDowell as crucial aspects of an environment that allows assessment to promote effective learning (McDowell et al. 2006). It further promotes student learning by successfully addressing two other key issues that the literature has suggested can cause problems.

Bradley notes that ‘it remains a tricky proposition to bring students in as full partners in museum functions’, but cites some successful examples where students have been able to add to the collections they are
Curating (Bradley 2009). This suggests that there is a potential for a clash between student curators and guardians of the (permanent) collection, which could disrupt the staff–student partnership. The Print Collecting and Curating module circumvents this issue because the works acquired for the exhibition with the funds made available by the university will be accessioned into the Kent Print Collection. This leads to a neat alignment between curating, collecting and the collection, a connection reinforced by the module convenor also taking responsibility for the Print Collection. How this hitherto cheerful arrangement will continue in the future as the Collection grows remains to be seen, and may emerge as one of the pedagogical challenges facing the module convenor. As Bradley suggests, the institutionalisation of the collection has the potential to alter the nature of the staff–student partnership.

A second issue raised by the recent literature is about the learning potential represented by physical environments. Claims continue to be made that ‘the benefits of digitisation are obvious’ but this has been often been disputed (DCMS 2016: 38). By making everything available, online environments can remove the opportunities for serendipitous learning by channelling the possibilities of where researchers can search (Hammond 2006). The materiality of the activity, from the dealers in Portobello Road to the exhibition space itself, creates a practical – that is to say, practice-based – environment that shapes what and how the students choose to learn. It also situates the module convenor’s own curatorial expertise as part of this landscape of practice, rather than as an object for the students to admire from a distance and reproduce as best they can. Furthermore, working with unclassified material encourages students to learn about how to classify things and gain an understanding of how collections work. The handling collection is a key resource here as micro-curating activities using the collection serve to engage prospective students and can be used as a resource by teachers from any subject wishing to explore the potential of curating to foster a more connected student experience.