

Embedding Widening Participation in the Curriculum: History of Art in the Community

PTAS Grant Final Report

Rationale:

History of Art is often considered to be an elitist discipline. Our subject area in Edinburgh is one of the biggest departments in the UK, yet lacks diversity in its student body. Figures over the last few years have shown that it has one of the lowest rates of Widening Participation indicated students (those from low progression schools, families with no background in higher education or mature students) in the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Lack of diversity is an endemic problem for History of Art departments, as recent initiatives from our professional body, the Association of Art Historians has demonstrated.

The aims of the PTAS-funded project were to investigate and promote widening participation in History of Art at the University of Edinburgh with the aim of creating a 40-credit third-year honours course. Research carried out to implement this course aimed to provide a framework for better understanding the challenges that the subject area faces in attempting to attract a more diverse student body. Additionally, the project also aimed to serve our current undergraduate students by providing practical work experience, whilst introducing more state school pupils to the possibility of applying for a History of Art degree.

This report details the findings of the student surveys, focus groups, interviews and research carried out over the course of this project. These findings resulted in new work experience opportunities for our students, the creation of new, collaborative work placements within the History of Art Department and Moray House, the keynote talk at the Association of Art Historians Widening Participation Seminar, and the emergence of new partnerships and projects which have continued to promote the discipline of art history to wider groups. By raising awareness of these concerns within the next generation of art historians, our aim is to contribute to the greater accessibility of History of Art over subsequent years.

Implementation

The research for this project was carried out in two phases. The first phase investigated why History of Art had a relative lack of social diversity amongst its students. The second phase examined how we might be able to develop coursework to solve some of the problems.

Phase 1:

A. Interviews with Art Education Providers

Dr Emily Goetsch, the RA for the project read the current literature and visual arts education practices and conducted a series of interviews with teachers, outreach workers and administrators. Our sense that History of Art had an “elitist” reputation was confirmed, but it was useful to have specific examples of the problems that interfere with the delivery of art education and to connect with schools and institutions, which we hoped to integrate into later parts of our project.

Our first point of contact was with colleagues in Admissions at the University of Edinburgh. We discussed the then-new criteria for acceptance into a History of Art degree, as well as looking at how spaces are allocated. Admissions are working hard to make access to the university as open as possible to WP indicated students in History of Art, as well as other areas. It was clear that our focus was best placed on attracting applications from students from a broader range of backgrounds.

This led into a series of interviews with Head Teachers and Art Teachers from schools in low-income areas around Edinburgh. We went into schools such as Ross High School, Broxburn Academy and Forrester High School to get a sense of how art history was (or was not) integrated into the curriculum. Time and funding were clearly issues that plagued art teachers wanting to integrate elements of art history into the curriculum. On a practical level, the pressures of GCSEs and the Curriculum of Excellence limited the time that teachers had to write new lessons or cover art historical topics in their classes. For example, John Knox from Broxburn Academy cover the Scottish Colourists and Coco Chanel each year to provide students with some background that might allow them to respond to essay questions on art and design, but were unable to go much beyond that.

Beyond the relatively defined problem of time, stigmas associated with art became a prominent talking point in these interviews. The teachers that we spoke to made it clear that many of their students did not perceive art, or art history, as relevant to their lives, or useful in the “real world”.

In addition to interviewing school teachers, we spoke to various charities and education departments to better understand how art was being delivered to other audiences throughout Edinburgh. We consulted the Education Department at the National Galleries of Scotland, the Grassmarket Community Centre, Art in Healthcare, Artlink and the Widening Participation Team at the University of Edinburgh. These institutions provided insights into programming for adults, groups in lower-income areas and those with mental and physical disabilities, which ranged from the organisation of school visits to the National Galleries to selecting and curating art in mental institutions to help patients recover more quickly and effectively. The organisations were also providing arts classes to adults with mental and physical disabilities, introducing inmates to art’s history and methods of creation and generally organising events which allowed people of all ages from vastly diverse backgrounds and stages in life to experience and create art in positive ways.

These interviews made it clear that art and art history were being used, in practical ways, to inform and improve the lives of various audiences. Problematically, however, the resources available for this type of work were frequently limited.

Several key points became evident through the interviews:

1. Funding and a lack of time made teaching art and art history very difficult at different levels, contributing to the lack of available learning opportunities.
2. Art and art history were not viewed as subject areas which would lead to employment and practical use and therefore were not being developed as fully as possible.
3. Art and its interpretation in gallery, healthcare, education and employment settings is being used creatively to help improve quality of life for a large range of audiences.
4. There was demand amongst our own student body for work experience in art education and interest in areas of outreach was strong.

Phase 2:

Phase 2 considered how we could best address the issues raised in Phased 1 through changes to our curriculum.

1) Student members of the research team conducted informal interviews in focus groups with their peers in February- March 2015. These suggested a significant amount of interest in Widening Participation activities becoming part of the curriculum. They also organised a series of workshops in galleries in Edinburgh on Friday afternoons open to secondary school pupils, with the support of the ECA Widening Participation Coordinator, Cara Samuels. Creating their own lesson plans was valuable experience for our students, but we had problems attracting participants from the schools. It was clear that this idea was not sustainable in the long term, as more formal relationships with schools were needed.

2) We had meetings with colleagues in other subject areas who were already running community-based courses, such as the Geoscience Outreach course, to see how they managed various aspects of the course such as assessment.

3) We interviewed key staff members in History of Art to see how a new course might fit into the curriculum. It became clear that the need to increase Widening Participation is part of a range of curriculum developments that are currently being discussed in the Subject Area. The PTAS project's Principle Investigator, Jill Burke, is now the Undergraduate Director for History of Art, so these curriculum changes will be informed by our findings. However, because of these more thoroughgoing changes to the curriculum we decided that creating a

new course at this time was not pragmatic. Instead we decided to incorporate new widening participation initiatives into our existing third-year Work Placement course.

4) Meetings with colleagues in the School of Education were hugely positive. There was a sense that Education students often lacked the skills and confidence to teach History of Art-based subjects, but recognised the potential value of this work in the classroom. It was decided that by working with History of Art students, they could collaborate to create lesson plans that could be used in state schools in Edinburgh.

5) We are currently running these work placements for the first time, with four History of Art students working with their peers in Education to create lesson plans (see Appendix A for more details). We will get feedback from students in both History of Art and Education so we can build on this project in the future in the light of our review of the curriculum as a whole.

Dissemination

The RA attended workshops and gave the keynote lecture at the Association of Art Historians (AAH) workshop, 'Sharing Good Practice in Art History & Widening Participation in Higher Education' which took place in March 2016. This event was organised by AAH in response to this PTAS-funded research, and saw lecturers from universities throughout the UK, museum educators, school teachers and outreach workers come together to address issues of widening participation, share WP strategies and think of ways to consolidate resources in order to lobby for additional support.

The AAH event led to the creation of a new contact groups, the sharing of resources and initiatives, which include "Art History Alumni Stories" to encourage new students to take up art history, as well as new programmes to bring students into museums. Furthermore, as a result of this research the University of Edinburgh has been selected by AAH as one of its four university case-studies for the 2016-2017 year. The RA for this project will continue to work with AAH to develop initiatives and explore possible new ways of engaging with different groups.

History of Art students have also benefitted from this work as we are currently offering four new work placements, which allow students to work with the Moray House School of Education and teachers in training. These students will learn skills related to lesson planning, curriculum design and class delivery while sharing their knowledge of art with the teachers-in-training. Students will leave not only with these skills, but also having had the experience of going into schools and assisting with the delivery of classes.

These placements have already attracted attention from the AAH and we are working with the web team at the University, who are planning to feature the students and the interdisciplinary project. We hope to further expand the placements and offer new positions not

only with Moray House and local schools, but also with other local outreach and arts institutions.

Appendix A

HISTORY OF ART EDUCATION PLACEMENTS

History of Art student will build working relationships with their peers in teacher training in the School of Education at the University (at either Primary or Secondary level, depending on interest) and collaborate with them to make teaching materials - and probably also teach one class alongside them (students will need to get PVG clearance [<https://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/disclosureinformation/pvgscheme.htm>] for this)

- 1) Early in semester 1, the Lecturer in Art in the Moray House School of Education has a meeting with the History of Art students to explain the brief for the placement. Students then research a suitable topic for a class of students in the early years of high school / primary school - this will involve art historical research as well as looking at the school curriculum.
- 2) At the beginning of semester 2 the Widening Participation coordinator (currently Emily Goetsch) will give a lecture to Education students in all subjects (about 120 students) talking about the use of images/art history in the classroom across the school curriculum. The History of Art students introduce themselves as a point of contact should any students want to develop ideas further in this direction.
- 3) Later in January, the History of Art students give a presentation of their ideas in small-group workshops of Art Education students who will be encouraged to work with them to create a class plan.
- 4) The History of Art students help Education students to write a statement to Head of Departments to teach their class at school once school placements have started in February. If desired, they then help deliver the class.

Appendix B

Emily Goetsch, Keynote Lecture to the Association of Art Historians Widening Participation Group at the "Sharing Good Practice in Art History & Widening Participation in Higher Education" workshop, Wednesday 9 March, 2016, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London – see associated PDF file.