

The Pre-Raphaelite Experiment: new ways to engage audiences with historic collections through collective user-generated interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a short overview of the HLF-funded Pre-Raphaelite Experiment, where Manchester Art Gallery trialled new ways of engaging audiences with historic collections through user-generated interpretation. The year-long programme brought families, community groups, schools and volunteers together to re-evaluate one of the city's highly valued but potentially insufficiently-understood cultural assets. In a significant departure to the Gallery's standard approach to interpretation, one room was transformed into an evocative environment designed to focus responses on four key Pre-Raphaelite works. The experiment completion comes at a time where cultural organisations are challenging more 'traditional' interpretation models in order to engage visitors in a more collaborative dialogue. As well as getting closer to their audiences, Manchester's approach of working with targeted groups provided a series of learning points to inform future strategies for collective interpretation. It has helped evidence the case for long-term action research and creating a culture of experimentation, evaluation and development.

Keywords (up to 5)

Manchester, historic collections, 'user-generated' interpretation, participation

Introduction

In Nina Simon's blog post she asks 'how does experimentation play a role (or not) in the culture of your organisation?' (Simon 2012)

A culture of experimentation was embraced by Manchester Art Gallery during a year-long collaborative programme (taking place July 2011 - July 2012), which aimed to develop a greater understanding of the relevance of the Pre-Raphaelite collection to a contemporary Manchester audience. As part of its new artistic vision, the gallery was eager to extend its reputation for engaging visitors in a dialogue, providing two-way learning opportunities and using visitor 'voices' to stimulate displays and interpretation.

The Gallery has become nationally and internationally recognised for its Pre-Raphaelite collection. The works are amongst the most requested for loans out to exhibitions and in recent years have been shown around the UK as well as in the USA, Canada, Japan, Italy, Sweden, Germany and Belgium. However, the Gallery felt that its interpretation of the collection was not engaging with new audiences and relied too heavily on communicating an art critical perspective to visitors who already had an interest in the Pre-Raphaelites. The aim therefore was to place visitors and targeted participant groups at the centre of an effort to discover new meanings and connections with 21st Century Manchester - something that the funder of the project, the Heritage Lottery Fund - firmly supported. The Gallery placed the Pre-Raphaelite experiment at the forefront of its ambition to re-interpret its 19th Century collections and re-capture the radicalism and dynamism of industrial Manchester for 21st Century audiences.

Audiences are curating content and contributing their opinions online (whether positive or negative) like never before. It is not new to find 'contemporary' interventions alongside individual historical artworks, nor community response galleries (usually in their own corner of a temporary exhibition space or an adjacent room). However, the approach to interpretation with the Pre-Raphaelite experiment was different.

Firstly, it was a focused intervention, taking place almost entirely in one (public) gallery space. It was a significant departure from the Gallery's standard approach to display and interpretation in their historic rooms, and there were noticeably fewer works than normal in one gallery. Situated next to the centrepiece Pre-Raphaelite room, Gallery 6 provided the main hub for a growing body of multiple-voiced interpretation, activity and discussion from each participant group, in an effort to re-engage the public with the collection. It sought to change the 'product' from an experience that was normally didactic, to that of a more deeply engaging, self-discovered experience.

The design aesthetic brought attention on four key Pre-Raphaelite works, including Hunt's *The Hireling Shepherd*, Collinson's *Answering the Emigrant's Letter*, Rosetti's *The Bower Meadow*, and Millais' *Autumn Leaves*. It allowed visitors to physically engage, alter and interact with the space by adding their own responses on comment cards which could be placed alongside the works. The gallery was essentially "seeing the audiences as equal and active participants rather than passive recipients of information" (Black, 2000). As such, the creative space developed organically across the year, beginning with simply the four paintings in focus, and little curatorial interpretation - aside from a series of questions that were posed to visitors. As the participant programme progressed during the year, user-generated interpretation produced by the groups was added to the space, thus continually changing to reflect the varying responses and galvanising further dialogue with the general public.

The number of comment cards collated from the creative space alone during the experiment year demonstrated how the majority of visitors wanted to engage in a dialogue and how passionate they felt (either positively or negatively) about the Pre-Raphaelites. Often

visitors would write on other cards that had been left, or add their own hand-written comments nearby to agree or disagree with views – thus producing an ongoing dialogue within the space itself.

Secondly, it was truly participatory. Simon (2011) defines participatory cultural institutions as ones where;

"...visitors can create, share and connect with each other around content....instead of being “about” something or “for” someone, participatory institutions are created and managed “with” visitors.”

The experiment involved a range of participant groups from key priority learning audiences: families, schools, health and wellbeing community members and volunteers. It offered a new way for these participants to engage more deeply with a selected number of works and provide their own user-generated interpretation as a result. Working across participant groups meant the Gallery gained multiple voices for the collective interpretation in the creative space. It was truly a learning-driven project, challenging the views of visitors who came into the space, or who experienced the participant’s responses through some form of live interpretation. This form of ‘user-generated’ response mirrors the contributions that audiences are now making in online environments such as social media platforms. It is increasingly more imperative that offline as well as online dialogue with visitors occurs – it is becoming expected as an integral part of the overall visitor experience.

Finally, the experiment took place over a period of a year rather than just as a ‘one-off’ short project. Taking a longitudinal and action-research approach meant that the Gallery was able to develop a greater understanding of the groups and individuals over a period of time, which brought a number of benefits. As well as informing debate on the strategic direction of co-curatorship and interpretation, it also helped to improve the knowledge, creative idea generation and key skills of its internal audiences. It helped to better understand the needs of different participant groups, and that experience is now helping to shape future programming.

A glance at the Pre-Raphaelite project blog (Manchester Art Gallery, 2011-2012) shows the great amount of activity that took place with the four target participant groups. This included a ‘take over’ of the Gallery’s main space for a families, a brand new network where teacher’s responded to the collection through their own creative practice, training new volunteers to become ‘Art Bites’ facilitators, and a large scale live performance piece written and performed by health and wellbeing groups. Two examples from the programme with participant groups –volunteers and schools– are briefly outlined below.

Volunteers

The volunteers’ strand of the experiment set out to provide an element of live, collective interpretation within the experiment hub of Gallery 6. Participants were recruited as a group and training was delivered intensively over seven sessions. The aim was to develop new skills and confidence in delivering and facilitating an ‘Art Bites’ discussion with the general public, centred on the Pre-Raphaelite works. The approach of using volunteers in this way, i.e. as facilitators was a totally new way of working for the Gallery. Usually volunteer ‘guides’ join one at a time (as and when someone drops out) and undertake a long period of study into works and themes within the collection, which they then deliver as detailed talks. These Pre-Raphaelite public discussions were intentionally different to those already being given by existing guides. The volunteers were asked to immerse themselves in one particular

subject matter - here the Pre-Raphaelites, and then facilitate a collective discussion with visitors rather than give a didactic talk. Each volunteer delivered two or three public sessions which began in October 2011 and continued every Friday until the end of March 2012.

The collective interpretation approach during the training sessions showed the volunteers how much can be gained from understanding other perspectives on the works as well as their own – which was the exact same intended impact on visitors who would be attending the Art Bites sessions.

'I was surprised by just when you know these paintings inside out...you don't! There is always so much more to see and think about and by interacting with other people you can enrich your own understanding and viewpoint.' (volunteer)

Most of the volunteer facilitators had an interest in the paintings at the start of the project. However they really took ownership of the artworks and felt a great sense of connection with them. Some changed their opinions of the paintings as a direct result of the group debates in the training sessions.

'I know so much more about all the paintings now and it has increased my liking for, and appreciation of, all of them.' (volunteer)

The Art Bites sessions were extremely popular and well attended (ranging between eight to thirty visitors). The live, collective interpretation worked well for engaging visitors in a deeper exploration of selected works from the Pre-Raphaelite collection. Indeed, the evidence indicates that this approach meant visitors considered work in more depth and for a longer period of time than they would have done independently. It was a successful way to encourage visitors to respond, discuss and debate pro-actively with others – often resulting in visitors changing their mind after listening to the views of others, or noticing new details in the paintings.

'The session was very good because it makes you look at a painting. I never know how long I should spend in front of a painting and it makes me realise you should spend longer. And listening to other people is very useful because you then see other things that you miss.' (visitor)

'We gave them one or two leads ... and then they're in full flow. One person described a painting and offered words ...others came into the conversation and said 'well I don't see that...!....they had a varied opinion of what the painting was actually all about.' (volunteer)

It continues to be debated whether the live interpretation lent itself to a richer and potentially more meaningful dialogue than was occurring within the experiment hub of Gallery 6. Subsequently, the experiment has led to a new model emerging for working with volunteers at Manchester Art Gallery, which has also been rolled out at Manchester Museum and The Whitworth Art Gallery. The volunteer Art Bites team went on to win the 2011 Marsh Award for Museum Learning regional award (northwest) in recognition of their contribution.

Schools and colleges

This programme of work aimed to stimulate new approaches to curriculum delivery by giving teachers and teaching assistants space and time to reconnect with and develop their own creative practice. Thirteen participants from primary and secondary schools worked with an artist over a series of five formal training sessions to produce their own creative responses to

the Pre-Raphaelite collection. They collectively explored thoughts, feelings and images, relating to family, memories and everyday events. The finished pieces were displayed within the gallery and pupils subsequently created their own responses through workshops at the gallery, and back in the classroom with an artist. Each teacher received a free workshop in the gallery, a self-guided visit, and an artist ran a workshop in school to extend the session further. This was then integrated into a class project. Work from the pupils (and from the teacher's network) was displayed in the changing experiment hub of Gallery 6, on a continual rota.

Teachers outside the network were also given an opportunity to be involved. An 'open-to-all' teacher's course was held with for KS2 and KS3/4 with each school receiving a free workshop for a class visit and £100 towards transport. The Gallery integrated the experiment into their newly qualified teacher (NQT) programme and ran a specific session for new teachers to Manchester so they could become familiar with the Pre-Raphaelite collection.

Some of the key findings from this strand of the experiment are summarised below.

i) The notion that the experiment 'humanised' teachers and galvanised a true personal experience

As the project took place across a longer period of time and involved individual reflection and/or challenges for participants, it became a very personal experience for those involved. There is clear evidence that the project strengthened and improved bonds between staff and pupils as a direct result of seeing their teacher's artwork on display. It also appeared to break down barriers with pupils who normally exhibit a lack of respect for staff.

'I think it broke down a few barriers between me and the kids. They saw me more as a human being rather than Mr Kemp in Year 6 who's getting us ready for SATs. I think it strengthened a few bonds... there's one child in particular who has really bonded with me. I can talk to him now and he'll be honest with me. If he's done something wrong he won't lie...he'll open his heart to me because he knows my story, which is very similar to what he's gone through in his life so far. He's seen a kindred spirit.'

Seeing the extremely personal responses from the network teachers 'humanized' them, changing pupils' attitudes towards staff because a 'new' side to the teacher was revealed. The user-generated interpretation from the teachers allowed pupils to empathize with teaching staff and enabled pupils and teachers to explore the same subject and topic themes - working on their responses and learning together. This motivated the pupils to create their own responses and gave them a renewed sense of belief that they could do the same. For example, the pupils became more confident in trying other 'new' creative mediums back in the classroom having seen their teacher's own attempts in the gallery space.

Having their responses on display within the Gallery also personally touched the teachers and their families, increasing confidence in their ability to create artwork. Two teachers from the network returned to university as a result of the experiment to undertake creative MA degrees.

ii) the notion that a gallery can be a classroom

Throughout the project the teachers recognised that a gallery space could - and should - be viewed as an extended version of the classroom; as a creative resource and learning tool. They gained new facilitator and interpretative skills which would enable them to lead self-guided visits no matter what the artwork or venue. There was also evidence to demonstrate that they had developed a real sense of ownership of the gallery - taking their own families to visit and visiting themselves in their own personal time.

'If you'd have said a year ago 'take your kids around the gallery and show them round' you would have thought 'no I don't know anything about half the artists displayed in there' but actually you don't need to know a great deal to come and use it as a learning tool.' (teacher)

Pupils reportedly communicated more effectively, valuing the comments of their peers than they did back in the classroom, and the open space of the gallery fostered a greater sense of creativity.

iii) the benefits of mixing primary and secondary staff

The ideas that teachers transferred to the classroom were influenced by multiple voices from all key stages because of the experiment- thus impacting on their pupils' learning experience. It was a real benefit for the teachers to be able to keep returning to the mixed group to share and discuss ideas which they had then tried back in the classroom after each session. The collective interpretation which subsequently was displayed in Gallery 6 reflected the mix of responses.

'What we did in the classroom was affected by the fact of how everybody here responded very differently. If I'd have done it on my own, and just had my own work to go off...maybe the kids work would have been different.' (teacher)

iv) developing interpretative responses within the gallery was a method for enriching the curriculum back at school

The combination of the teacher network approach, pupil visits to the gallery and the artist in school was viewed by teachers as a real enrichment of the curriculum - something that provided them with sustainable ideas to use each year, across topic areas. New creative skills were transferred to the classroom and other colleagues were encouraged to try them out too; producing a ripple effect throughout the school. There was evidence that the programme spurred on change - rather than keeping to what had been the 'norm' with art delivery, new ideas were tried out across school and plans creatively enhanced as a result of being part of the experiment.

'In terms of OFSTED inspections we had one in November...and it was great to be able to talk about coming to the gallery and using the community as part of our curriculum. They were very impressed with that - they said it was definitely an enrichment to our curriculum, going above and beyond.' (teacher)

v) user-generated interpretation was an accessible process and a way to particularly engage boys

A number of the network teachers reported a marked improvement in boys' behaviour and the relationships they had between each other and with staff. It was viewed as an accessible project - the approach appealing to both confident and unconfident children. In

particular, live interpretation such as drama within the gallery space brought less confident children out of their shell.

'...our boys find it hard to access certain things...we talked about *The Hireling Shepherd* - 'he's after a bit of nooky' and as soon as they realised that was the theme behind it, it was accessible to them. Normally lads are a bit stand off-ish but this project really got them engaged...' (teacher)

The collective ideas developed by the network of teachers during the process influenced the content and timing of three new workshops which were produced for the Gallery's overall schools programme offer. For example, the teacher network responded particularly well to *The Emigrant's Letter*, *Autumn Leaves* and *The Hireling Shepherd* - this helped to shape these for the relevant key stages. Involving teachers in continual professional development has continued during the Autumn 2012 temporary exhibition at the Gallery: *The First Cut*.

Conclusion

Manchester Art Gallery began by asking of themselves the same question as Simon (2011) poses; "How can cultural institutions reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life?". At the completion of the experiment, a number of learning points were being reviewed; a selection of these are included below.

The personal experience

Participants and staff talked about their involvement on an emotional level - staff worked 'with' participants throughout their journey, rather than being passive observers. This level of personal sharing of experience and collective interpretation of the works brought about a real sense of 'community' with staff and participants being physically moved by their experience and contributions. The project indicatively developed a real sense of trust between Gallery staff and participants, and brought about a sense of ownership that galleries in general are places 'for them'.

Choice of collection

The choice of using the Pre-Raphaelite collection for the experiment worked well due to the immediate connection to Manchester and the themes which visitors were evidently able to respond to.

Being given freedom to 'take over' space and display participants work

The freedom given to 'take over' a space to focus on a small number of historical works and display user-generated interpretation alongside them was a liberating experience for staff and participants. For participants, the experience of having their work displayed within the Gallery alongside historical works had a profound effect – which then rippled out to their families.

'...the general visitor has found some kind of different ownership of that space that they don't in other gallery spaces.' (staff)

The approach allowed visitors to add their own responses and physically engage with changing the space, challenging views with their peers, the Gallery and increasing knowledge. This mirrors the participatory model discussed by Simon (2011) who believes that “...visitors’ contributions personalize and diversify the voices and experiences presented in cultural institutions. They validate visitors’ knowledge and abilities, while exposing audiences to content that could not be created by staff alone.”

The Gallery team changed the display every 6 – 8 weeks which gave them a regular opportunity to meet together and reflect and share learning points and ideas about the display.

'It has been absolutely brilliant to take participants responses and put them up, without having to produce something on brand, produce a label, get it printed. And to be able to that as a group...' (staff)

Conversely, although no longitudinal research was undertaken into visitor behaviour within the space, indicative and anecdotal evidence points to the fact that some visitors were confused with what the participant intervention was in the space, why it was there, and how they were supposed to engage with it. This was the case at the start of the project too – when only the key four works were displayed with no intervention. Internal discussions are underway debating whether further live interpretation within the space itself may have counteracted any possible confusion and enabled visitors to engage more deeply with both the historical and contemporary works.

Choosing to work with targeted participant groups

The decision to work with selected participant groups was however deemed a successful way to ensure a targeted and audience-focussed approach to the experiment. It meant that staff could trial ideas in a 'controlled environment' - and gained new skills through having the freedom to test these new approaches. The bespoke activity with each group meant it could be tailored to individual needs and has (across all strands) been a catalyst for informing future work with such audiences. It has enabled new models to be created - for example the approach to working with volunteers which, as stated above, has now been rolled out across other museums within the Manchester Museums Consortia. Involving participant groups across different learning audiences meant that the Gallery gained multiple voices for the collective interpretation in the creative space.

Capturing the richness of response from the live interpretation

Selected quotes from some of live interpretation sessions (e.g. Art Bites) were displayed within the creative space. However, an internal criticism was that the evidence in the gallery did not adequately reflect the collective interpretation formed in live interpretation sessions. Visitors to the space also found that these quotes were out of context and confusing. Further discussion are being held to discuss whether a) if these type of live collaborative interpretation sessions should be captured, and b) if they would even mean something to general visitors who had not participated in the live interpretation if they were somehow shared within a space.

‘...we had fascinating conversations in the Art Bites sessions. How can we capture those conversations and the sessions? From a volunteer perspective I don't think we captured that and not sure how we would...’ (staff)

'I do think there is a gap between how sophisticated and engaging people's responses are live, to what comes evident in the gallery. I don't think it does it justice...when they're having those discussions that are illuminating; I'm not convinced that what remains reflects it. There needs to be a way of making it more apparent.' (staff)

Truly understanding the public reaction to the creative space

Although there were response cards and general opportunities for visitors to feed back (through standard gallery mechanisms in place such as comment cards) an open criticism of the project was that there was little research conducted with visitors in the actual creative space.

A series of questions have now been posed by the Gallery team to consider within their future interpretation strategies. These include:

- i) Is it 'acceptable' to have a space which, at select points in the year, is dedicated for user groups and their intervention?
- ii) How much of the overall Pre-Raphaelite collection was engaged with – and does that matter? Did four paintings represent the collection and provide enough opportunity for engagement from both participants and the wider public?
- iii) How can you get across the responses from live interpretation into the space - and is this important? Should a new model be weighted towards live interpretation?
- iv) How can activity within the participant groups be sustained (for example, the teacher's network)?
- v) Would further research into the general public reaction help to fill any of the gaps in knowledge to inform a future strategy?

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