Displaying co-creation: an enquiry into participatory engagement at the university museum

Introduction: Situating co-creation in participation/co-production

Co-creation is often seen as a way of democratising museum practice which actively involves audiences in processes such as content (re)interpretation, curation, internal decision-making or collecting. Increasingly, museum practitioners have called for participatory and co-creative forms of museum activism that pursue social justice (Simon, 2010; McSweeney and Kavanagh, 2016; Janes and Sandell, 2019). This positioning of the museum as partner, however, raises a number of issues around the sharing of production, decision-making and power. In this chapter, we offer a critical examination of the practical implementations of co-creation at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA), Middlesex University, London. We define co-creation as a process of collaborative engagement between audiences (students across a range of disciplines), ourselves (museum staff) and the museum's collections, to develop new interpretations through object-centred pedagogic practice. Although we operate in a higher education sector, we distinguish this form of co-creation from the wider literature on co-creation in HE, whose main emphasis has been on involving 'students as partners' in the design, structure, delivery and assessment of university curricula (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Bovill et al. 2016). In our context, co-creation concerns object-focused pedagogic practice that is centred on students' active engagement and first hand haptic learning. In this space, students enter alliances with others (human and non-human) to produce distinct forms of collective knowledge that connect with but are also distinct from the museum's collections. Taking a self-reflexive practitioner perspective, we draw on these experiences to illuminate the discursive logics and practical applications of co-creation as collaboration and consider the issues that arise when engaging students as co-creators. This approach is consistent with a range of scholarship on co-creation that outlines student agency, active involvement and shared responsibility in learning and teaching as key components of co-creation (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Johansson and Felten, 2014; Bovill, Bulley and Morss, 2011). However, we wish to distinguish our role as educators from that of other university teaching staff: we work across and in between the spaces of the museum and the university and while our teaching sessions are embedded in various modules we are ourselves not formally part of academic departments or in the curricular decisions that are made therein.

In this chapter, we explore what we see as the slippages that occur between co-creative processes and acts of 'making things public' (Latour, 2005). We wish to highlight the tensions that emerge in

the process of making co-creation - an always open-ended social relation - into a 'thing' that can be talked about, written about, and publically displayed. As such, we argue that in the context of the university museum with its attendant pressures to perform according to market-driven logics, participation and co-creation are not straightforwardly democratic. On the one hand, students are required to demonstrate specific learning outcomes which are informed by increasingly financialised models of education. On the other, the university museum operates within a neoliberal rationality whereby its own value must be justified to the university through the production of measurable outputs. Within this context, to what extent can the university museum be a collaborative partner? What is the scope to generate responsible learning experiences that recognise students as co-creators in a university where employability is paramount? (By 'responsible' we mean learning experiences that neither treat the students' experiences as metrics to be measured nor exploit their free labour). How does the university museum negotiate the balance of authorial control and participatory practice when it is itself subject to scrutiny over its value-creation? How might we operationalise co-creation as a set of relationships that do not reproduce forms of engagement that serve the objectives of the university, and the university museum, or its projection of the student-as-client? How might we incorporate a language of openness in our collaborative endeavours as much as in their outcomes?

This chapter tackles the assumption that co-creation is inherently good by exploring the multiple iterations and negotiations required within the specific institutional setting of UK universities and university museums in the twenty-first century. We propose that any attempt to generate, describe or examine co-creation must take into account the forms of institutional reasoning and governance that frame these activities. Museum practitioners must recognise what is at stake in their envisioned role as public service providers. This is characterised by a conflict of functions whereby museums simultaneously shed *and* hold onto institutional authority, a tension that is expressed in the "process-driven (cultural democratic) forms of participatory museology'' against the instrumentalist outcome-oriented aims of museums (Robinson, 2020). To turn to the context we are describing, university museum practitioners might begin by looking closely at the kinds of governmental reason that are mobilised through their activity within the university. To follow Robinson, the promotion of participation as a moral good re-inscribes museums into new forms of governmentality that reinstate their role "in constructing the socially acceptable, productive and ethical citizen" (Robinson, 2020). Within this reading, the extent to which audiences (students in our context) "are both able and motivated to contribute significantly to real participatory processes remains unclear and untested," and can lead to tokenistic participatory practices that do not yield institutional control (Neal, 2015; Head, 2007). If the nominally collaborative endeavours undertaken by museums

raise such political and ethical challenges, there is as yet little research about the practical application of such efforts. Thus this chapter makes a contribution by consideration of actual curatorial and educational practices of co-creative practice in one specific university museum context.

The university museum in context

In parallel with the growing concern on the part of museums to encourage participation and community engagement (Lynch, 2011; Morse, 2013; Sandell, 2002), the university sector has also placed an emphasis on knowledge exchange partnerships and collaboration (Owens, John and Blunt, 2017). The university museum is located on this threshold between the museum and the university, as it shares in the epistemological and practical concerns of former, but arguably is also distinctive in its aims, purpose and audience vis-à-vis the latter, and is expected to respond to the specificities of the HE environment. One clear example of this is that MoDA has no broad public programming and no gallery spaces, so that engagement with collections mostly occurs first-hand with students and objects in a designated study room, on campus or online. For more general audiences, the main mode of engagement with the museum's collections is online via the website and podcast series. At the same time, MoDA's activities are informed by the strategic plans of Middlesex University, which are oriented towards student achievement supported by practice-oriented research, knowledge exchange, and flexible, accessible, practice-led teaching. These strategic priorities fold within so-called 'radical creativity' which sees innovation, disruption, challenge and risk all as components of a transformative education. These terms, which surely borrow from the tradition of critical pedagogies (hooks, 2003; Freire, 1993 [1970]), are however located within industry-based development and sketch out a very different political outlook. Here, co-creation as a future-making activity that involves dialogue, multiple subjectivities and being open to the unexpected (Graham and Vergunst, 2019) must occur within the specific parameters of industry skill-building and outcomes *rather* than in the pushing of its limits.

As the above makes clear, Middlesex University is no different to other UK universities in its overall orientation: it is deeply enmeshed within in the prevalent marketized model of HE, whose prime focus is students' future employability (Reay, 2013; Temple, 2016). Proponents of employability argue for its importance on various economic grounds (Minocha, Hristov and Reynolds, 2017), arguing that global competition between countries has shifted the position of universities so that they should be engines for innovation and growth that can fuel national economies (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). On the other side, critiques of employability discourses have

been plenty, including: the 'customerisation' of student learning and experience; skill acquisition being measured according to projected economic gains or individual benefits; an emphasis on self- over collective interests; a displacement of social justice by the discourse of aspirational mobility; and the turning of students into units of profit (Morrish, 2017). This socio-cultural shift has borne its effects on university museums, which are dependent on university funding, priorities and benchmarks.

While it is not our intention to rehash the critiques of neoliberalism and the university, there are some useful insights from political theory regarding the effects of neoliberalism not just as an economic order but as a form of 'governing reason'. Following the philosopher Michel Feher, political theorist Wendy Brown discusses how this engenders a form entrepreneuralising subject- hood that engages in the production of a "portfolio of self-investments" designed to maintain or enhance human capital value (Feher, 2018: 180-81; Brown, 2019). This is implied in the employability discourse that has become widespread in universities in the UK. As several scholars argue, neoliberalism's associated discourses of "flexibility, self-sufficiency and individualism" all pervade the UK's higher education sector (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth and Rose, 2013: 433). It is in this context that the capacitation of students as resourceful, creative and entrepreneurial selves must be understood (Ball, Pollard and Stanley, 2010). This is of particular relevance to MoDA and Middlesex University, provided the large number of vocational subjects (such as Fashion, Photography, Graphic Design or Illustration) across the creative industries, that have been emphasised as "a key source of employment growth in the 'knowledge economies' of post- industrialised nations" (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth and Rose, 2013: 431).

Brown and others have argued the de-democratising effects of neoliberalism in the following terms: it is the market which "comes to govern the institutions and practices of 'democracy' and to exhaust its meaning" (Brown, 2011: 119). That is, neoliberalism does not explicitly destroy democratic institutions, but the political is here reconceived "as a field of management or administration" (Brown, 2015: 127). This means that inclusion and participation, Brown argues, cannot be meaningful in so far as this form of governance "reconceptualizes democracy as distinct or divorced from politics and economics: democracy becomes purely procedural and is detached from the powers that would give it substance and meaning as a form of rule" (Brown 2015: 128). The transplanting of these forms of reasoning onto the university museum has implications for education and, by extension, for the work of co-creation. In this neoliberalised HE context, the rationale which extends into these activities is one that prizes the entrepreneurial spirit and devalues the social and the political by orienting students towards individual and employment gains. And yet the social, Brown argues, "is what binds us in ways that exceed personal ties, market exchange, or abstract

citizenship" (Brown, 2019: ch. 1, para. 26). Taken to a university context, it is useful to locate the social within an understanding of sociality as "a dynamic relational matrix within which human subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, continually plastic and malleable, and through which they come to know the world they live in and find their purpose and meaning in it" (Long and Moore, 2012: 41). Thus, if 'the social' might in this sense be considered a foundational component of co-creation, how does this beckon us to review what we mean by co-creation in a university context that eschews those very categories? Who is engaging in it, to what ends, and through what forms of interaction? How far do instrumentalist motives shape co-creation, and even so how might we identify 'gaps' and 'cracks' in the edifice of the neoliberalised university? Can we?

As we argue, co-creation cannot be understood as an entity or thing. It is neither stable, nor reducible to outputs. Rather, we see it as a textured and fluid process that *can* open new 'spaces of possibility', of doing and being, but which might also not (Amsler, 2015: 48). If we can agree with Olssen and Peters that within the neoliberal university, terms such as 'critical', 'experiential' and 'reflective' learning have been transformed to provide an a 'preparation for the world of professional work' (2005: 328-9), how might we de-link these forms of situated learning from their now normalised (and normative) work orientations? As we will argue, there are dimensions to our object-centred pedagogic practice which join up critique, experience and reflection in a space where learning is co-creative. These are moments that open learning to the unexpected: students are encouraged to indulge their curiosity, to engage with objects autonomously but also to share their insights through conversation. However, in its more common and visible manifestation co-creation is presented by the museum as an item of display value, a public asset that intends serving the purpose of justifying the museum's activities and its existence within the university. It is this tension between the practice and delivery of co-creation that we explore and highlight in the following section.

Towards participatory co-creation

The ways in which museums enable access to collections and objects has been a major concern among those interested in participation and engagement (Merriman, 1991; Hetherington, 2000; Candlin, 2008). Being close to objects, touching and interacting with them have all featured prominently in museum access and learning policies (Chatterjee, 2008). However, it remains the case that the dominant form of engagement in most museums is mediated through display. Graham argues that the 'glass case' stands as a synecdoche for modernity of the museum and its taxonomies of separation between things and people:

> The glass case has been totemic for fifty years of critique – a shortcut for revealing museums' too-simple, modern, imperialist and deadening production of power and of facts. […] As a 'material-discursive practice', the use of glass cases plays a part in the production of particularly 'modern' types of matter, space, time – and therefore politics. This is a practice that generates a world which demarcates between objects and people, museums and the public and a past that is complete and a future which is yet to come. Furthermore, the glass case offers an argument for museums' institutional legitimacy – to secure objects for future publics 'on our behalf'. (Graham, 2016: 2)

Graham links this function of the 'glass case' as 'access-barrier' to the co-production debate in so far as it "offers a very particular and restricted version of the more general move in coproduction in public policy to both pluralise and stabilise" (6). That is, "the access-barrier of the glass case manages my engagement as part of justifying the legitimacy of museums' political purposes and arrangements." As Graham argues, knowledge is something that is represented *to* us, and objects belong, as items of display, to a past that is 'complete' (6). What we see here then is the tension between the opening of the museum outwards while there is a simultaneous closure that seeks to stabilise and legitimise museum practices.

Yet the kind of experience that Graham describes here has little bearing on the approach to co-creation taken at MoDA, since, in the absence of glass cases and public exhibition galleries, all encounters between visitors and objects are hands-on. Every in-person (as opposed to online) encounter between student-users and objects happens at first-hand, is multi-sensory and experiential. Museum staff do not start with the assumption that knowledge is located in a particular place, or that it is inherent within a particular object, but rather that it is produced through the interaction involving students, objects and museum staff. Object based learning found in university museums was traditionally more discipline-specific (see for example, resources on 'Vertebrate Diversity' aimed at Life Sciences students at University of Reading Museums) (Hide, 2013, p. 5), but here our goal is to use objects as the starting point for discussion, based on students' existing knowledge, interests and learning needs, which might involve responding to a creative brief. Co-creation is chiefly here an approach to knowledge that is process-oriented and dynamic, but also embodied and emotional. This builds on Kolb's theory of experiential learning: students proceed from concrete experience to abstract conceptualisation (Kolb, 1984; Chatterjee and Hannan, 2015). Their encounter with material artefacts forms the basis for observation and reflection, enabling students "to focus their attention on a third thing rather than each other", and thus provides a focal point for conversation (Simon, 2010; Sitzia, 2018).

The nature of this pedagogical encounter is threefold: objects are *sites of interrogation*; the curator is an *interlocutor*; the group engages in relational interactions to produce *polysemous interpretation*. When we say that *objects are sites of interrogation,* we mean that they are not (just) things to *learn about*, but things to *think with*. In these sessions, co-creation happens as students are brought into direct contact with objects and prompted to bring their background knowledge, experience and particular interests to reflect on how they and these objects exist in the world. What immediate responses do the objects elicit; what agents, institutions, and practices might be involved in the objects' making; how familiar are students to them; and how does this connect with their respective worlds? The role of the curator-as-pedagogue here is to facilitate discussion as an *interlocutor*, to pose questions, introduce ideas and situate their own subject position. This approach works against the normative proposition that universal knowledge that can be learnt "without a context, and be voiced from nowhere" (Arashiro, Demuro and Barahona, 2015: xiii). Its ends are not instrumentalist, but neither are they neutral. Rather, following bell hooks, the intent is to build "true dialogue" in that "both sides are willing to change", to test and experiment (hooks, 2003: 192). This process of the co-creation of knowledge brings multiple readings with different temporal inflections to develop "a collective process of interpretation" (Burnham and Kai-Kee, 2011: 144).

What is relevant here is that agency unfolds between artefacts, students and staff through what some scholars refer to as "intra-action", meaning that in the encounter between objects and subjects, both are mutually constituted (Barad, 2007, p. 33). By not privileging the museum as custodian of past meanings, this approach opens objects to *polysemous interpretation.* The past is not an essential function of participation: objects, and the existing knowledge the museum has about them, are merely a starting point to prompt conversations and self-reflexive examination, while also serving as part of a larger iterative process in which students will draw on this material culture to produce new artefactual, audio-visual, or textual responses. This encounter reflects the intersection of various temporalities (past, present and future): looking back occurs at the same time as we look forwards. This arguably challenges the boundary between thing and person generated by museum glass cases along with the temporal assumptions identified by Graham; that is, that the past is complete, and the future is yet to come. It is instead a moment of encounter, of co-presence of the human and non-human entities where there is distributed agency and intra-relationships which can never be anticipated or known. This presents a participatory co-creation that is relational, less concerned with representing knowledge than with the entanglement of things and persons. In this space, students are responsive to and *responsible for* museum objects, as they engage in sensory processes that activate material modalities of care: careful and slow looking; touching and feeling; listening and storytelling.

Reflections on the rationale of the university museum

The paradox about the process of active co-creation described above is that it is invisible, processual and uncategorisable. It is also relational, social and distributed, but it is not visible to anyone outside of a particular teaching session, nor is it what you see when you visit the museum's website and find the tab 'Co-creation'. And this brings us back to the earlier point around the institutional setting in which we operate. There are two interconnected imperatives acting upon the museum: firstly, the imperative to render accessible and visible its activity as a public museum; secondly the function that this visualisation has in value-creation. The Co-Creation page of the museum's website is the primary showcase for the many interesting ways in which students and others engage with the museum's collections (https://moda.mdx.ac.uk/creativity-co-creation/). In designing the website, we were concerned to present the museum as people-centred rather than object-centred, since as noted above, we see the museum's collections as the starting point for discussions and creative endeavours in the present. In demonstrating that the museum's collections have been used for creative inspiration (by writers, makers, designers, dancers and so on), we aimed to make this activity visible to a general audience. We intended to provide users with a sense of the range and variety of activities that go on around the museum's collections, and for us to have the opportunity to offer new content rather than a static series of webpages. We also intended that making these examples visible would generate further interactions with the museum, with the example provided by the co-creation pages helping to inspire other people who might not previously have thought the museum's collections were relevant to them.

Yet as we have argued, what is at issue here is the need to articulate the way in which the processual dimensions of co-creation as they happen in teaching are subject to the demands of 'stabilisation' (Graham 2016: 6). The museum wields control and authority by defining the parameters through which its co-creative practices are made visible, because it is ultimately their public display which confers value on the museum itself. That is, there is an imperative for the museum to demonstrate its value, in terms of contribution to education and public engagement, through public display (albeit not in this case in a public gallery but on the museum's website and via social media). Here processes of co-creation that are collective and social are re-presented by the museum as the finished work of individuals, thus contributing to the neoliberal discourses outlined above. The intended audience of the website is partly the general public but also university decision-makers concerned with quantifying the value the museum provides to the institution. Thus, co-creation as a participatory project becomes co-opted into something that must add to the marketability of the University as a whole. This dissonance between the practice of co-creation and its ultimate

presentation for public view should not be seen, however, as a contradiction, but as the prerequisite conditions under which co-creation happens in the first instance (indeed is *allowed* to happen). Were such public display refused by MoDA, to what extent could the museum continue to engage in co-creative practices with students? The interpenetration of these two senses of co-creation, we argue, requires further inquiry and theorising.

Graham's argument is that in its public policy iteration, co-production involves an opening up, a way of recognising that more people (both in terms of number and variety) can have a role to play in the production of public goods. Yet, at the same time, as she points out: "co-production implies a demarcation and stabilisation between different types of agencies, between state/government and public/communities/users" (Graham, 2016: 4). In other words, co-creation may offer little more than the illusion of audience co-participation, since there are irreconcilable tensions inherent in the project of, on the one hand involving more people, and on the other hand "seeking to retain, and even stabilise, museums' political assumptions" (Graham, 2016: 4). This point is crucial and relates to the ways in which we address the question of co-creation with students at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture. We recognize that there is a tension inherent in the 'Co-Creation' page of the museum's website, in the sense that while not constituting museum 'objects' as such, the entries, whether by individuals or groups of people, crystallise into finished form or 'product' that which has been until that point effectively understood as part of a creative process.

Conclusions

As we have argued, co-creation is not a straightforward thing. It requires approaching collaboration with a willingness to be open to the unexpected, to ways of being and knowing that are co-produced and relational, founded in conversation. The scope for the fullest expression of this, we have argued, is constrained by the limits of university education, with its market-oriented focus on skill-building and measurable outcomes. Here the rationale for making 'outputs' public is partly the need to make visible what otherwise remains invisible and thus unclassifiable, and unquantifiable, for an assumed audience of university management. It is partly also the intention that making activities public will provide impetus and legitimacy to students and others who might see the co-created work shown as inspiration for their own critical interrogation of the museum's collections, and as an addition to participating students' own portfolios when they are seeking future work. But while recognizing the need to celebrate and publicise the work of the museum we also want to ask: what might be lost in the process of making something public? Is there an argument to be made against publicness, if we are to form and sustain holding spaces for co-creation? Are we successfully achieving a balance of

authorial control and participatory practice, and is such a balance even possible when the museum continues to need to demonstrate the value it provides to the institution? To what extent can we achieve co-creative experiences without also co-opting the resulting outputs for our own ends? By raising these questions we draw attention to the as yet unresolved tensions inherent in the rhetoric of participatory practice. As is the case for other museums, the wider context in which MoDA exists proves crucial: funding pressures, local priorities and interests shape our conditions of possibility and the forms of participation that we can generate together with students. In our case, this concerns a financialised model of education, which means that we must confront and negotiate competing forms of co-creation in our work: one process-oriented, the other output-focused. As we have argued, further theorising of co-creative and participatory practices is necessary on the ground, to attend to place-specific and local agendas that frame and to some extent define how we can engage, with whom, and to what ends.

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