

## Using public engagement to enhance student engagement: An example from History

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Making History, a first year undergraduate module for history students at Sheffield Hallam University, is an innovative curriculum development that embeds public engagement and promotes student engagement. Students undertake a research project in small groups on an aspect of Sheffield history. They are required to use primary sources and produce a poster for display at a public history exhibition. The module uses a mix of lectures and workshop sessions to support students work, and is assessed by an individual portfolio comprising a research essay, a primary source report, and two reflective pieces related to employability and student's experiences of public history and the exhibition. Their posters are not assessed, though their production and student's attendance at the exhibition are expected as they enable production of their final portfolios. Reflecting on the first two years of delivery, this article uses the module to explore the relationship between public engagement and student engagement in higher education. The approach takes both history and students outside the lecture theatre and classroom via visits to museums, the local studies library and the archives, a Sheffield History Walk, and the production of a poster for display at a public history exhibition. The article begins with an overview of the contextual literature concerning both public and student engagement. It then explores the ways in which public engagement is achieved through different activities, and evaluates the extent to which this promotes student engagement.

Public engagement refers to the way in which the higher education sector connects with a wider audience – people who do not already have a formal relationship with higher education. According to the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), it describes ‘the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit’ (NCCPE, 2016). Much of the existing literature about public engagement focuses on community engagement and particularly volunteering. This article, in accordance with the scope of the Making History module, adopts a much broader definition of public engagement. It examines the many and diverse ways in which history students and the public interact with one another.

A key concept informing the module is public history, which takes many forms including museums, libraries and archives, and heritage trails. The relationship between public history and academic history has been a turbulent one, but increasingly there is an acceptance that higher education should be accountable and applicable. It has been argued that ‘without becoming more outward looking in terms of methodology and practice, academic history risks becoming increasingly

entombed in a “pyramid of irrelevance”, read solely by professional historians and a handful of history students’ (Donnelly & Norton, 2011, p. 155). At the beginning of the module, whilst some students had a general awareness and understanding of public history, most had little practical experience of public history as part of their studies. Any experience was predominantly visits to museums and places of interest and doing small-scale local history studies at school or college. Embedding public engagement through public history into the curriculum provides students with practical and transferable skills that are separate and distinct from those acquired through conventional academic study.

Student engagement refers to the attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, passion, and motivation of students in the learning and teaching process; as well as attendance, participation, skills acquisition, and academic performance. Indicators of student engagement can be categorized into different areas of engagement – intellectual, emotional, behavioural, physical, social and cultural. The Making History module promotes student engagement by embedding public engagement into the curriculum. By examining the different public engagement activities, it is possible to assess the impact on student engagement.

The production of a poster for display at a public history exhibition is at the heart of the module. To facilitate the production of the poster, and to ensure students had an understanding of public history, the module incorporates a number of public engagement activities. Many of these involved taking students involved with the module out of the classroom, a key facet of enhancing student engagement through public engagement. During the second week of workshops, the students were taken to the Sheffield Local Studies Library as part of the timetabled delivery of the module. The aim of this workshop was to support students commencing their research on an aspect of Sheffield history by introducing students to the main repository of secondary sources on Sheffield and some primary sources.

Local Studies is part of the main Sheffield Public Library and is located within five minutes walking distance from the University campus. Despite its close proximity to the university, the majority of students had not been before and many did not even know it existed. In fact, a large proportion of students had not used a library other than the university learning centres for their studies. In 2012-13, 78% of 74 respondents had never used a library other than the university learning centres for their degree, and in 2013-14 this rose to 92% of 65 respondents. The module challenges students to undertake research work outside the university. The outcome of incorporating supervised visits to the library was that by the end of the module a much higher percentage of students were using external libraries for their studies. In 2012-13, 93% of 43 respondents had used a library outside the university learning centres for their degree work by the end of the module, and in 2013-14 86% of 65 respondents had.

An excess of 80 students were accommodated at the Local Studies Library in just over three hours. The library staff welcomed the increased volume of visitors to this public resource facility, and were always on hand to help students with any inquiries they had. Students visited the library during normal opening hours, and by utilizing a very public space it made students not only respectful to other users of the library at all times, but also very aware of the relationship between academic and public

history. Whilst module staff were on hand to provide guidance to students in regards to locating resources, utilizing the knowledge of the library staff was essential to many projects. Indeed, one student who followed up on a potential project about a local brewery with the library staff was surprised to find that the local archives not only had a vast amount of sources, but that the majority of these were un-catalogued. One of the main outcomes of the workshop was that students began to understand the vast range of resources available to them outside of University provision.

While the Local Studies Library gave students access to a limited number of printed primary sources, the majority of primary sources, and certainly manuscript sources, for Sheffield history projects are located at the Sheffield Archives, around 10 minutes away from the University. Predominantly students on the module had never used archives before. In 2012-13, 66% of 74 respondents had never used an archive before, and only 16% had used archives for their university studies. In 2013-14, 74% of 65 respondents had never used an archive before, and only 14% for their university studies. Archival research is central to the study of history, and yet many first degree history students graduate without any experience of using archives. Incorporating primary research and the use of archives into the first year of a history degree provides students with a great opportunity to be historians 'doing real history' at an early stage in their studies. Consequently an optional visit to Sheffield Archives with module tutors was quickly fully subscribed, and all students were encouraged to visit Sheffield Archives during their own time to advance their projects. A large number of students visited the archives independently, and on one occasion when one of the authors visited the archives for their own research 20 students were visiting for their project research. By the end of the module, the proportion of students who had used an archives for their university studies had increased significantly. In 2012-13, 88% of 43 respondents had used an archives for their studies by the end of the module, and in 2013-14 89% of 80 respondents. The wealth of primary material available online helps explain why this percentage was not even higher. Moreover, students felt more comfortable locating and using primary sources by the end of the module. In 2012-13, 48% of 74 respondents were either not confident or unsure about using primary sources as part of their research and degree studies. By the end of the module only 2% of students were not confident, although 35% were still unsure. In 2013-14, 67% of 64 respondents either did not feel confident about locating and then using primary sources as part of their own research at the start of the module or were unsure, whereas by the end of the module 80% of 80 respondents felt confident about using primary sources as part of their research and degree. Only 3% were not confident, with the others remaining unsure.

Students were encouraged to request some documents ahead of time to view and to fill in registration forms to speed up the process of visiting the archives. However, those that did not prepare ahead of time discovered the time consuming and often frustrating process of archival research. Used to the on-demand style of digital resources, many students found the need to wait up to an hour for a document to be retrieved de-motivating. Conversely, some students did find some very useful sources, and were inspired by the wealth of material available – much of which they simply could not view in the space of a twelve week module, but showed an interest in pursuing at a later date. For many students, the historical research projects

became more tangible and exciting as they made their own discoveries in the Archives. A high proportion of students cited archival research as something they had enjoyed most about the module, especially learning how to use archives and local studies as they felt this would be useful during the rest of their degree studies.

The final three optional visits were organized to provide students an opportunity to engage with and understand public history through personal experience. The first of these was a history walk around Sheffield centre of approximately one mile in length, which took about an hour to complete. The walk was designed to show students the multitude of links to history perpetually around them, but which they might not have seen. For example, one student was surprised to find out a nightclub they had visited was built as a school in the early 1800s. The walk also enabled students to draw parallels with their projects, which gave them both a greater understanding of their project themes and the way in which historic events have been captured in the cityscape of Sheffield. It was also a very visual presence of students from Sheffield Hallam University engaged in a constructive learning activity outside the classroom. Indeed, members of the public stopped to chat with students and tutors on the walk, as they were interested in what the group were doing and wanted to impart their own local knowledge. This two way process of knowledge exchange was an effective demonstration of public engagement. The other two optional visits were to local museums. The first of these, Weston Park Museum, was more focused on family entertainment which the students both engaged with and explored the limitations of this approach to museum curation. The second visit was to Kelham Island Industrial Museum, dedicated to the industrial heritage of Sheffield.

A number of the optional visits took place on Wednesdays, which presented challenges in terms of recruiting students. As a day when most students on the module had no other classes, practical impediments such as cost, commuting and childcare came to the fore. Nevertheless, these were strategic scheduling issues rather than a deficiency in content. The feedback from students who did partake in the visits was generally positive, and demonstrated how public engagement was promoting student engagement. Many students commented on how the visits helped to develop a course identity. Comments included:

*"I liked the hands on approach to Sheffield history, exploring, visiting places not just sat in a classroom."*

*"I liked the trips out on a Wednesday afternoon and how you got to know people on the course better."*

The aforementioned visits allowed the students to engage with the public and explore history outside of University in anticipation of their public history exhibition later in the semester.

Alongside this practical experience of public history, the students were also introduced to the theoretical context of how and why the public engage with history through lectures and workshops as part of the module programme. This became the foundation for the production of a poster based on the student's research projects for display at the public history exhibition. By being aware of the different ways in which history is presented to the public and the issues involved with this process, the

students could apply it to their own research output - the public history poster. Each group of students produced an A1 poster based on their research project - the emphasis was on presenting the same detailed research they would base their academic essays on for a different audience. A key challenge with the production of the posters was the fact they were not assessed. Some students voiced concerns about the amount of time and effort that went into creating the posters, only for them not to count towards their final marks. In this case, we found that some students engaged more with the exhibition rather than the process of production for displaying their work. Summative assessment has, from our experience, proved to have both motivational and de-motivational outcomes dependent on a student's overall engagement with the module and levels of learner autonomy. Nevertheless, many students enjoyed the opportunity to present their work creatively and apply their knowledge and understanding of public history to a practical situation. The pride they had in the work they produced was often self-evident by their conduct at the public history exhibition.

The public history exhibition, held in week 10 at the university, showcased all the posters and was open to members of the public (Figure 1, overleaf). Every student was expected to attend the exhibition and talk to visitors about their research, and although there was no formal credit for this, the average attendance at these exhibitions has been 99%. This necessitated the students engaging with members of the public, who often had little or no prior knowledge of the areas of Sheffield's history being presented at the exhibition. Students were very aware of whether people came to look at their poster, their ability to answer questions put to them, the extent to which they sustained interest in their poster and/or sparked the interest and imagination of their audience. They also realized the exhibition was as much about how they presented themselves, as well as how they presented their research. A historian with experience of delivering public history was invited to judge the posters, present prizes for the top three posters, and deliver a public history lecture. The exhibition gave students practical experience of public history and the challenges that this entails - something they reflected on in their public history essay at the end of the module.

Feedback from members of the public and university staff was incredibly positive, and demonstrates the extent to which effective public engagement promoted student engagement. In 2014, David Hey, the historian who judged the posters and delivered the public history lecture said that he was 'impressed by their enthusiasm for this kind of work', which they agreed was a rewarding way of 'getting into History' and of understanding historians sources and methods. It was good to meet so many enthusiastic young people'. The module leader reflected that 'the exhibition was a great success', and regarding student engagement he commented that 'it was telling that almost every student attended' and 'that the vast majority really did want to talk about their posters'. Victoria Beauchamp (WEA) added that 'It was lovely to see so much enthusiasm from the students about the work they had produced. The students that I spoke to were engaged and articulate about the research they had carried out. It is great that such a module exists to allow students the chance to develop their skills in analysing original source material and learning how to present it in an engaging and professional way to the public. I certainly discovered things about Sheffield that I had never come across and came away feeling inspired by what I had

seen...it was lovely to be in that environment of genuine excitement for learning in the university'.

Figure 1. The exhibition and the student presenters



At the end of the module, students were invited to share their experience of all aspects of the module with a view to gauging the extent to which public engagement activities had promoted student engagement. A number of students commented that they had enjoyed undertaking their own research project. By being able to choose the topic and study something they were interested in, they were afforded more independence, took control of their learning and research, and used their own initiative to decide what to include and what to exclude. The module was successful in stimulating greater learner autonomy, producing students who were better able to take responsibility for their own work and undertake independent research, and who took ownership of and pride in their work, as reflected at the exhibition.

This in turn stimulated genuine interest and curiosity for historical research. The research project was for many students not only a requirement of the module but an interesting area of research that a group of students had become actively engaged with and were genuinely enthusiastic about. Students expressed this by saying 'the module allows you to study a subject that you take a genuine interest in which helps towards motivating yourself to do the work' and that it 'feels like we are doing proper historical research'. Project themes also became the foundation for some third year dissertations, evidence of the sustained interest and curiosity in a project theme acquired during the Making History module.

Those students who actively participated in a range of public engagement activities during the module tended to have a better attendance record at lectures and

workshops and achieved higher grades. They were also better equipped to participate in constructive historical debates in the classroom and articulate the transferability of skills acquired. One student reflected that they were 'developing primary research skills which will help me with the rest of this degree and my career'. Some students also liked the applied nature of the module, by making their historical research relevant to a wider audience and applying knowledge and skills to a real public history situation. One student commented that they liked 'making history in a creative way'. Another explained how the module had made them aware 'of how history is applied to everyday situations...different ways of presenting work (poster) in exhibition' and that they had enjoyed the interactive aspects of the module.

Through the focus on Sheffield and the public history exhibition, students engaged more with the local community. They were more aware of public resources available to them that may be useful for the rest of their degree. A number of students also commented that they enjoyed learning more about the city in which they were studying. The public engagement activities, taking the students outside the classroom, were cited by a number of students as having had a positive effect on the learning process. One student felt more engaged and motivated due to 'The hands on approach to Sheffield history, exploring, visiting places not just sat in a classroom'. Others commented that they were able to learn more through taking part in the trips. The trips and group work also supported the wider student experience, promoting the emotional and social elements of student engagement. This helped to build a course identity by giving students the opportunity to get to know one another outside of the classroom. A high proportion of students also cited group work as being an important and enjoyable aspect of the module. One student said 'I enjoyed working in a group as it's a nice change and allows you to get to know others on the course'.

## **Conclusion**

By giving students the opportunity to engage widely with the public as part of their studies, the Making History module can be seen as having a positive effect on the student experience. Furthermore, the range of ways in which public engagement took place as part of the module allowed students to see themselves as part of a wider historical community in the Sheffield area.

There are some transferable aspects of this approach which could be applied to a variety of disciplines. To summarise, this is based around three key observations from our approach. Firstly, by demonstrating the resources available to students outside of the University, they are able to improve their learner autonomy and interact with a wider range of material than in the University library. Secondly, allowing students to see the physical evidence of what they have been studying allows a subject to 'come to life' and facilitates the development of their own views and perspectives in a manner uncommon in the lecture theatre or seminar room. Thirdly, by incorporating public engagement – either through exhibitions or visits – students are able to build pride in their studies and consider how their work and research is viewed and considered outside of academia. Each of these has the potential to be incorporated into almost any other area of study and have all respectively improved student engagement.

We have seen improvements in attendance among students from our approaches, and the development of a course identity beyond the smaller seminar groups which rarely interact with each other. Furthermore, given the positive feedback between students on optional visits, there also develops a sense of 'missing out' among students which can serve to motivate other students to engage more in the process of learning. However, in some cases such as the exhibition, some students were seen to be engaging because they had to as part of their studies, rather than due to an overwhelming desire to engage. In any case there will be some students who are not as engaged as others, and this provides a challenge for future research and development.

### **References**

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