

Poverty at the UCL Art Museum: Situated Learning in a World of Images

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Abstract

This article is about fostering students' ability to become creative interpreters of images using activities in a specially curated art exhibition. Drawing on theories of knowledge and learning that emphasize the role of communities of practice and situated learning, I make four related arguments. First, it is valuable for students to go beyond texts and engage critically with the images and other creative practices that form the texture of their everyday lives. Second, students come to us already as members of a community of practice that knows certain things: therefore, their learning must engage directly with the things they already know and believe, in order to enable them to challenge received wisdom or defend their existing positions more critically and thoughtfully. Third, the images that surround them in everyday life create the conditions of possibility for their existing knowledge practices, and those images have a history and context that is frequently not known or critically examined by students. Fourth, and consequently, it is important not only to enable students to engage with historical images that form the context to contemporary imaginations but also to support them in making the links between seemingly very different types of images from past and present. I conclude that, with appropriate scaffolding and support, we can use art galleries to help students learn to link their classroom and book learning with their everyday life experiences in order to become critical and engaged spectators in a world of images.

Keywords: Art galleries; international development; situated learning; communities of practice

The module gave me a new set of lenses through which to analyse everything that goes on around me. (Matilde, 3rd Year Law Student)

Every November, as part of my undergraduate Political Science module on Discourses and Practices of International Development, I get my class of 40 or so undergraduate students from across UCL to attend and take notes on an art exhibition featuring works by Durer, Rembrandt and Flaxman, amongst others. On the face of it, an exhibition displaying works from UCL's own collection, mainly by European artists and spanning the last five centuries, might seem to have little to do with debates about international development and contemporary world poverty. However, in this article, I will describe how I have made the exhibition a fundamental, valued and aligned (Biggs, 2011) element of the module, which some students now take specifically because they want to relate their extra-curricular engagements with the arts to their disciplinary studies of Politics, Geography, Economics and so on.

As the quotation from Mathilde suggests, one learning outcome from the module as a whole is to offer new ways of understanding the world and to challenge some of the assumptions about poverty and development that students come into the classroom with. The intention is that, after taking the class, they will be able critically

to examine particular instances of poverty images and common poverty tropes, offering their own informed, critical interpretations rather than accepting conventional wisdom.

It is common to use metaphors about sight and seeing when we describe learning: “I see!”, a student may say when they understand a point. “It’s a whole new way of seeing things,” students tell me when they feel they have understood something about discourse theory. However, in this module, when I talk about how students see the world, I mean something more literal. One thing I want them to develop is their ability to be critical viewers in a world of development images and to be able to read pictures as critically and thoughtfully as they do texts. This is because some of the received wisdom they carry with them about development comes from the highly charged visual imagery of poverty, famine and war that surrounds them in their everyday lives and is deeply embedded in their ideas and attitudes towards the poor. I want them to gain that “new set of lenses” in order to see these images in new ways, to stop taking their facticity for granted and to ask a new set of questions about how the world is represented. For this reason, I ask them to engage in depth with works of art that provide a historical context to the habitual “lenses” they have been using to view the world. I suggest that this engagement is a highly creative act that implies a set of imaginative leaps and fosters the ability to produce new, original interpretations of the world.

As I will elaborate, the notion of viewing the world through a particular “lens” already implies that the ways in which we see are social and conventional, embedded in the broader practices of the communities we inhabit. Drawing, therefore, on theories of knowledge and learning that emphasize the role of communities of practice and situated learning (Wenger & Lave, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991), I make four related arguments. First, for students to engage in genuinely deep, or transformative, learning, they must apply their critical faculties beyond the academic readings that usually form the core of academic syllabi and learn to engage critically with the images and other creative practices that form the texture of their everyday lives. Second, students come to us already as members of a community of practice that knows certain things about development and poverty: therefore, their learning must engage directly with the things they already know and believe, in order to enable them to challenge received wisdom or defend their existing positions more critically and thoughtfully. Third, the images that surround them in everyday life create the conditions of possibility for their existing knowledge practices and those images have a history and context that is frequently not known or critically examined by students. Fourth, and consequently, it is important not only to enable students to engage with historical images that form the context to contemporary imaginations but also to support them in making the links between seemingly very different types of images from past and present. I conclude that, with appropriate scaffolding and support, we can use art galleries to help students learn to link their classroom and book learning with their everyday life experiences in order to become critical and engaged spectators in a world of images.

I will illustrate my argument with examples from the Poverty in the UCL Art Museum exhibition, along with comments and reflections from the students themselves. Some of these comments were noted down or remembered from the time of the exhibition, others were emailed to me personally and I have also made use of the standard

anonymous student evaluation survey that my department organises for each module at the end of term. I put out a general call for comments as I started work on this article, the week after the module ended. The prompt was:

If you have any thoughts about *what* and *how* the exhibition helped you learn, in the context of the overall module, it would be incredibly helpful if you could let me know. It would also be good to know if you thought there were missed opportunities or problems with the exhibition or if you thought it was a waste of time. Please be honest, I won't be offended!

Three students, Agathe de Canson, Sarah Ginoux and Priya Rockley, were kind enough to write page long reflections and I have included their comments at some length as they are helpful in terms of showing exactly what the students took from the exhibition. I offered to quote them anonymously, but they wanted to be named in order for the intellectual debt I owe them to be properly acknowledged.

Before moving on to discuss situated learning in more detail, it is worth pointing out that there is not much literature on teaching in art galleries, despite an exciting literature on “object based learning” (Chatterjee & Hannan, 2016; Boddington, Boys, & Speight, 2016). These works haven't really considered the opportunities and challenges offered when learners engage with paintings and other visual media. In particular, whilst much object-based learning stresses the experience of “engaging the senses”, art galleries tend to be strict in their rules about not touching, and sight is the single, privileged sense. Furthermore, although viewers already draw on their experiences of living in a world of images, they have to work hard to understand paintings, prints, and drawings.¹ The demands they make pose a significant intellectual challenge, which needs to be engaged with in particular. However, the small literature that exists addressing teaching in art galleries specifically (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011; Murawski, nd) tends to focus on how professional art gallery educators can introduce diverse audiences to their collections and foster meaningful interactions with artworks perhaps leading to an “aesthetic experience”. Whilst this is a legitimate and important aim, this literature does not speak to the challenge of meeting specific disciplinary learning outcomes, as part of a broader syllabus, and what opportunities and challenges this might pose. I therefore hope, with this article, to make a contribution to the literature on education in art galleries by pointing out that creative student engagement with art can provide opportunities for advancing specific disciplinary pedagogical aims and objectives.

Situated Learning

Any scholarly reflection on teaching and learning must begin by giving an account of its assumptions about what knowledge is: how can we conceptualise the learning we want our students to engage in? The notion of “communities of practice”, generally attributed to Lave and Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 2000), is my starting point. Rather than thinking of knowledge as an individualised cognitive property of the teacher's brain, which can then be passed on to an eager and receptive learner, knowledge is instead understood to be a situated and relational property of a group of people: the community. To illustrate, Hoadley gives the example of photocopier repairers, whose knowledge is not limited to information and facts provide in manuals, but rather is embodied and practical, involving problem-solving together and passing on tips to

one another (Hoadley, 2012, p. 287). By this account, knowledge is best understood as a concrete and practical matter and is always materialised in relation to particular problems that need solving. For my purposes, this means that I want students to be able to stand in front of particular images and offer an informed, historicised critique.

Crucially, knowledge is, by this account, a creative as well as a collaborative act. If knowledge practices are situated and embodied, then it follows that there is no question of objective or neutral knowledge that exists independently of our understandings of it. As Maxine Greene puts it:

Even what we call 'facts' are the results of interpretation. Yet facts mean nothing if the imagination does not open towards intellectual possibility [...] The world is no longer an objective structure independent of our experience or our knowing; it is the world viewed, the world perceived. It is reality made meaningful by acts of our imagination, intuition, emotion, belief, sensation and cognition, no longer an abstraction rationally or logically defined Greene (2011, pp. viii–ix).

Such a conception takes students seriously as human beings who are already engaged in knowledge practices and interpretation, involving considerable creativity, and whose imaginative lives, as well as cognitive capacities, are at stake in their engagement with education (Illeris, 2002).

Ideas about international development and poverty are already deeply embedded in students' lives and the ways they view the world. Indeed, the first activity I ever do with them is to get them to name a "developed" and "developing" country and list their features. The answers are predictably uniform across the years: whilst development is linked with prosperity, technological progress, high standards of living and human rights, developing countries are understood to be poor, dirty, squalid, lacking and in need. These answers are situated in a global web of stories about developed and developing countries propagated by the media, the entertainment industry and charities in search of donations. By participating in these ways of knowing about the world, students are already engaged in a community of practice with each other (who all know the same sorts of things) and with the wider world of poverty action, inequality and privilege.

One of the desired learning outcomes of the module is to transform such knowledge and get them to engage in different kinds of relationships and practices: to feel empathy rather than pity, perhaps, or accountable rather than guilty. Such a transformation is deeply related to ideas, concepts and theories: it may only be possible for a student to question their feelings of pity by enabling them to understand the role of their own consumption practices, play in maintaining hierarchies of north and south (Darnton & Kirk, 2011). On the other hand, they may not be able to grasp the postcolonial and feminist critique of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988), until they have been confronted with the shock, and perhaps embarrassment, of seeing image after image of capable-looking white male development workers speaking authoritatively for and about women and girls who are assumed not to be experts on their own lives (Hutchison, 2014; Skalli, 2015). I suggest that a thorough conceptual understanding of these, sometimes difficult, ideas relies on more than just a cognitive change. Rather, they involved learners in a profound alteration of their understanding of how they are

situated in a world of relationships. This is inevitably a creative and imaginative experience, which requires students to engage emotionally in re-envisioning a world they had taken for granted.

Crucially, as the metaphor of “re-envisioning” suggests, this is a process that engages with the images that students consume on a daily basis, whether through social media, traditional advertising or the news. The “kid with the flies in its eyes” or the “selfie” of a cheerful white volunteer capably “helping” a black or brown, poor community in the Global South as they smile along in gratitude are obvious reference points that all students bring with them. Undergraduates may be skilled critical readers and consumers of texts, but they are often seduced by the facticity of such images, taking them for granted as neutral representations of the world as it “really” is (Shapiro, 2001). I want my students to be able to recognise that poverty images are generic (Rose, 2012, p. 23) and follow certain conventions. These patterns may or may not bear much resemblance to reality, but we tend to accept them at face value because we are used to them.

Furthermore, whilst I do increasingly encounter a few students who have a critique to offer of these familiar stereotypes – often with reference to the creative work of Radi-aid² and the Instagram adventures of Barbie Savior³ – their analysis is generally relatively superficial. They understand that certain sorts of images are patronising and racialised, but they are not yet in a position to extend this analysis to the systems of thought that underpin them. Thus, students may be willing to denounce simplistic advertising and journalism, but still assume that Western experts hold the answers to problems of poverty and inequality, which they understand to exist primarily in the Global South (for a good discussion of why such assumptions are problematic, see the following texts, all of which are on the class syllabus: Kadir, 2014; Campbell, 2012; Mitchell, 2002), and by extension that the purpose of their education is to enable them to become such experts.

The purpose of asking students to attend an exhibition, then, is to engage them in asking questions about the history of the images they take for granted, including the purposes to which they have been put, and the ways they are racialised and gendered. These aims which require considerable scaffolding and support, so that students are not simply wandering about in the gallery space wondering why they are being asked to look at artworks made long ago. It is to students’ engagement with the art and the way they are enabled to learn from it that I now turn.

The next section proceeds more or less chronologically through the students’ experience of the exhibition, in the context of the overall module, including some thoughts from the students themselves about the experience and how it helped them to learn. In keeping with the preceding discussion on situated learning as always involved in engaging with some particular task or problem, I have necessarily included some specific information on the module itself and the artworks I was able to use, the ways they were interpreted by me and the students, and the pedagogical outcomes of working with them. This is offered to help the reader understand the exhibition as a pedagogical event, rather than to argue for a particular political perspective on poverty imagery. I hope that teachers in a range of different disciplines and with a variety of pedagogical aims will be able to extrapolate from this example to consider how they might use art galleries to advance their own practice.

Poverty at the UCL Art Museum

The exhibition is one activity in an advanced undergraduate module called Discourses and Practices of International Development which runs over 10 weeks and attracts students from my own department of Political Science but also from across UCL. This means we get a good mix of students from disciplines as diverse as Economics, History, Geography, Anthropology and even Law, as well as many students from UCL's various interdisciplinary degrees.

The module has a strong focus on critical approaches to development within Development Studies and International Relations. In keeping with the module's home in the Political Science department, politics and relations of power are the central theme in understanding the world of poverty and development.

By the time they attend the exhibition, in the fifth week of the module, the students have been introduced to ideas and readings about the history of development as an idea and its relationship to ideas about empire and race. We have looked at some of the variety of different ways of thinking about, conceptualising and measuring poverty. They have traced the journey of their t-shirt around the world from cotton field to charity shop (with the help of Pietra Rivoli's excellent book: Rivoli, 2015) and considered how far their everyday lives as consumers are implicated in unequal flows of money and power that sustain poverty and inequality. We have looked at the prevalent logic of "helping the poor" in everyday discourse and asked some questions about how far a patronising attitude of pity towards the poor, which confirms the superiority of the rich postindustrial countries, prevails in international development discourse, what sorts of politics this might sustain and whether there are preferable alternatives. In particular, we consider whether a politics of "fair shares" (as advocated by Ferguson, 2015), associated with ideas like unconditional cash transfers or universal basic income, might be a useful way of contesting paternalistic approaches to poverty relief. The exhibition takes place around halfway through the term and is followed by more detailed work on how discourses of time, expertise, bodies and spirituality feature in the development theory and practice.

The overall topic for the week in which the exhibition takes place is "Representing Development" and before they come to the exhibition, students are asked to read an article by Emma Hutchison (2014) which examines in detail a number of photographs from newspapers of humanitarian relief efforts during the 2004 tsunami in South East Asia. We also read a report put together by the international development network, Bond (Darnton and Kirk, 2011), which likewise uses the concept of "frames". It argues that the complex political issues involved in international development are not well understood by the general public because of simplistic frames used by charities and development agencies. Taken together, these two readings act as a good introduction both to ideas about "framing" and to the notion that photographs and other images do not merely reflect a self-evident truth about the world, but rather interpret and put forward ways of seeing that can be subjected to critique.

Students are also asked to keep their eyes open in their everyday lives for images of poverty and development, whether that is on their jar of fair trade coffee, in the

newspaper, on television, on social media or in the adverts and appeals they encounter. I encourage students to share these pictures on the module Facebook group, so that we have a common set of images to discuss together. If they have been keeping up with the module content and done the week's readings, they should already be casting a critical eye over the images they collect, and this frequently leads to a good discussion on Facebook before we meet at the exhibition. Their prior engagement with, and specific relationships with, poverty imagery is therefore already signalled to them when they arrive. As Priya puts it:

The exhibition provided a really different way to engage with the course material because it made me reflect critically about images representations of poverty that, actually, I have seen throughout the years [...] without ever stopping to think about it. When we think of "images of poverty" we think of modern *Save The Children* adverts on television, instead of thinking about what poverty has looked like, and how it has been represented, over the years in the very part of London we study and live in.

The exhibition itself takes place in the UCL Art Museum using works drawn from UCL's own collection. It is timetabled on a Wednesday afternoon and is open for several hours so that students can pop in and out at their convenience, just like any other exhibition. Students are informed before taking the optional module that the art gallery visit is compulsory and this message is reinforced in the module syllabus and in class. Consistently, each year, the vast majority of students do come and spend time engaging with the exhibition.

I worked with the then-UCL curator, George Richardson, to identify nine artworks that speak to themes of poverty and inequality (broadly defined) and organised them into four thematic groups: "Before the development era", "The poor", "Helping" and "Working lives" (a full list of all the art works is in Appendix 1). I also developed a fairly extensive worksheet which is distributed to students several days before the exhibition. It gives some context, with more detailed explanations for the pieces that require it. For example, in the first iteration of the exhibition, students struggled to understand the cartoon by C. J. Grant (Appendix 1, Object 8032) because they had never been taught about the detail of the 1833 Emancipation Act (Hall, McClelland, Draper, Donington, & Lang, 2014), so some information about it is now provided.

Students engage with the exhibition in any order they want, as instructed on the worksheet. However, the works were grouped to make particular pedagogical points and students used each group of works to help them understand a set of issues and link them to ideas from the module. This is evidently quite different from traditional art gallery teaching in which students develop their own personal responses to, and understanding of, works of art in the form of art appreciation (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011), and may seem somewhat instrumental in its use of art. The artworks are not considered for their aesthetic qualities. The purpose is not to provide a transcendental experience, a state of contemplation or a renewed appreciation of the importance of beauty or wonder for understanding ourselves and the world. Nor is the aim to encourage students to develop critical judgements about the works' value as art, important though such engagement is (Bishop, 2012, p. 13). Rather, in keeping with the module's broader objectives, artworks are understood to be political objects that are deeply embedded in a world of knowledge practices and discourses

that they both reflect and reproduce.

I will next briefly elaborate the broader sets of questions, understandings and ideas that each grouping of works is intended to provoke, with some evidence from student reflections about how they were received.

“Before the development era”

This section contains two works and attentive students notice that they are separated by well over a century. As they observe, this is a much longer time than the period which separates us from the era of decolonisation that supposedly inaugurated the “age of development” (Sachs, 1992, p. 1). The first work is a portrait of Mary, Duchess of Ormond by John Smith from 1702 and the second is the cartoon about the slave emancipation.

Students notice, with help from the worksheet, that there is a young Black servant in the background of the portrait. They are also cannot fail to see the deeply offensive caricatures of Black people in the cartoon. Given the strong, racist language and visual stereotypes in this cartoon, we provided a brief explanation of why we had included this work, leading one student perceptively to note that “it sounds like you considered not including it because it’s offensive.” I admitted that we had done some soul-searching and she was keen to endorse our eventual decision to include, noting that it is important to acknowledge histories of slavery and racism in universities, so that students can understand them and link them to the ideas they are encountering in their studies. In the context of contemporary debates on how classrooms can be decolonised (Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nişancıoğlu, 2018), these conversations are critical to establishing the colonial history of ideas about international development and poverty. The artworks enable students to engage with full seriousness and gravity in histories of colonial violence precisely because they are viscerally distressing, in their visual as well as linguistic impact.

These works, then, powerfully remind students that there is a long history of colonisation and enslavement that forms the context for the world of development projects and programmes in which experts from the Global North take responsibility for solving the problems of the Global South, particularly those African countries plundered by colonisers and slave traders. In the context of the readings on colonial frames, it is instructive to see an image from the colonial era that obviously centres and values a White figure whilst using the figure of a Black child as a counterpoint to throw her perceived beauty, wealth and status into relief. For example, Sarah remarked that:

The exhibition also tackled the theme of ‘race’. According to the way black people were portrayed, it was possible to see how people at that time understood issues of race, how they considered black people, and what white people thought about themselves. This reinforced the idea that representations are never neutral, and reproduce certain ideas. This links to the core idea of the course, that discourses create a world and are never neutral. Paintings and images are thus discourses too, since they shape the way we see societal issues.

Students also consider how slavery and work relate to one another and what the key points of difference (or similarity) are between poverty and slavery. Finally, we raise the question of whether there are any images from today that future generations might shudder at, in the same way that we now react to the overt racism of these two works. Students report that they find this a particularly thought-provoking question, which forces them to look with newly critical eyes at the images that they take for granted, including those we collected on the module Facebook page.

The poor

This radical decontextualisation of the present is also important when we look at works depicting poverty in the second section of the exhibition. The first work in this section is relatively old: Lucas Cranach the Elder's woodcut of St Jerome in Penitence (Appendix 1, Object 360) dates from 1509 and offers a glimpse into a time when poverty was not routinely scrutinised for whether or not it was "deserved" or "undeserved" (Carabine, 2000; Katz, 2015), but rather foregrounds medieval Christian ideas about poverty and humility as virtuous and Christ-like. Students reflect, with prompting from me and the worksheet, on the specific ways in which poverty is now stigmatised and question the inevitability of contemporary ways of thinking about poverty.

As Agathe put it:

The works of art portrayed 'poverty' as various different things, and in various different ways: sometimes as deserved, noble, or shameful; sometimes infantilised, gendered, or racialised. [...]he exhibition helped convey the idea that the concept of 'poverty' is not universal or unchanging.

Sharp-eyed students also critique the implicit romanticisation of poverty in St Jerome's bucolic setting and this leads to useful discussions about how far contemporary critiques of development (in, say, Sachs, 1992; see also Ziai, 2004) also romanticise poverty and the poor in unhelpful ways, perhaps drawing on the Christian imagery that still persists in our discursive culture.

This work is thrown into relief by two much later works: an image of an elderly woman in St Pancras Workhouse and an etching from UCL's Slade School of Art from 1987 of a tramp (apparently naked in the cold and rain), both depicting poverty in its most stigmatised and humiliating form. Students have already read about the history of workhouses and the ways in which entitlements to relief from poverty increasingly became dependent on a willingness and ability to work, during the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions. Whilst they have a good intellectual understanding of the functions of workhouses and conditional benefit payments, the shock of seeing and paying attention to the misery of poverty in workhouses, or freezing cold life on the streets, is often remarked on by students. The intention of presenting these works alongside St Jerome is to encourage students to question the inevitability of linking poverty with work and of stigmatising those who do not engage in economically productive work. Sarah wrote that:

The exhibition helped to show how our way of thinking about poverty changed after the industrial revolution.⁴ The pre-industrial revolution era had a completely

different way of seeing poverty. In the medieval times for example, through the artwork St Jerome in Penitence we feel that poverty does not carry the negative connotation it has today. On the contrary, 'the poor' is associated with the religious, modesty, purity and humility. This is the artwork that 'shocked' me most, because it is very hard to take a step back from our modern conception of poverty, in which it is something completely negative, and understand that poverty could be understood in a completely different way. Through the artworks, we could see that discourses about the 'deserving'/'undeserving poor' was a modern creation reflecting the dominant discourses about poverty since the industrial times.

This extract shows a sophisticated level of understanding. Most interesting for my purposes is, again, the idea that engaging with artworks produces a "shock" that enables an imaginative, as well as an analytical, "step back" from received ideas and a rethinking of common-sense ideas, that would not be happen if students only read and engaged with texts.

Helping

The theme of how the poor are depicted and the ways in which the Industrial Revolution conditioned aid for the poor is continued in the next section of the exhibition, which contains two works separated by just over one hundred years. Both images depict rich benefactors giving to the poor: the first, a Rembrandt from 1648, shows a family receiving alms at the door of a home and the second is a Flaxman from around 1795 showing a woman and children being fed by a man hunched over them. The structure of both images is similar: both show the patron in a slightly raised position to the left of the picture and within a doorway. Both also show the beggars in a group with their eyes cast down. Students reflect on the power relations implied by this arrangement of figures as well as the structure of the images they collected before the session. They are encouraged to consider whether poverty images are generic and, if so, how far the images they are used to seeing owe their structure to these much older pictures.

Students also, with prompting from the worksheet and me, identify the differences between the two images. In the first work, we see reasonably well-dressed beggars of 1648 receiving a small coin with no apparent shortage of dignity and self-respect. In the second work, made around the beginning of the industrial revolution and just a few decades before the New Poor Law of 1834 (Carabine, 2000), on the other hand, we see a picture of desperation and abjection as ragged figures strain towards a bowl offering food. Students speculate on whether this is just a feature of the artists' respective imaginations or whether we might be discerning evidence of an ongoing shift towards modern ideas about poverty as a humiliating form of exclusion and dependence. We also talk about the difference between receiving money versus receiving food and the ways in which the poor have been subjected to control and surveillance that have curtailed their freedom to obtain the goods they might prefer rather than those that their benefactors think they need. This thought prompts some students to make links with our work in class on the merits of using foodbanks as a way of helping the poor.

Students alert to gender dynamics note that whereas the first group appears to be a

family with a father, mother and two children, the hungry figures seem all to be women and children, like the elderly figure in the workhouse painting. This sometimes leads to a productive discussion about the increasing conditionality of poor relief and the ways this has cemented particular forms of gender relations and gendered ideas about deservingness and (in)dependence (Carabine, 2000; Roy, 2014).

Working lives

Lastly, a section on working lives contains two works. One of these is an 1835 view of UCL itself (then London University) as seen from Gower Street by George Sidney Shepherd. This work is always a firm favourite with students who enjoy the shock of seeing the familiar made strange. The second is an etching from 1880 by George Percy Jacomb-Hood depicting pay day in a cotton mill. The key question I ask students about both these works is whether the people in them are poor. This enables a discussion about the criteria we use to define and conceptualise poverty. If we measure poverty through modern assumptions about a good life in a city like London, such as access to basic goods like running water, the people in the works might look poor to us and students' first reaction is usually to agree that they are poor. However, once we look closely at their clothes and possessions such as domestic animals, we might start to doubt that the Gower Street figures are really poor in absolute terms by the standards of their time. Students note that they are observing inequality, particularly the contrast between the grand and impressive UCL portico and the modest lives played out in its shadow. What is important here is an understanding that measures of poverty and wealth are dependent on time, place and context, and therefore so is our determination of who is poor, who is entitled to assistance and what sort of assistance might be most effective. Students are therefore enabled to engage critically with the conceptual structures through which they view poverty. Sarah remarked that: "It helped contextualise the history of 'development', and show how different representations of poverty tell different 'stories' about poverty."

There is no "right answer" to the ways in which we measure poverty and students are free to develop their own response to this question. However, raising the question in the exhibition reliably leads to useful conversations about the assumptions and values are underlying particular approaches to poverty measurement and what the consequences are in terms of public action.

Another question raised by the familiar sight of streets we walk down every day is how far inequality, wealth and poverty are still a feature of this cityscape. Students mention seeing the abject poverty of homelessness and rough sleeping alongside the evident wealth of central London. However, we also talk about the spatialisation of contemporary inequality and the ways in which modest working lives such as those depicted are no longer a feature of central London. We also talk about what is hidden from sight when we look at an image like this and how public spaces and the ways we imagine them contain gaps and invisibilities. I may mention that Bloomsbury was home in this era to many slave owners and traders⁵, a racialised history that is not evident from the image. This leads students to reflect on which people and lives we don't see in images of UCL today: we sometimes talk about the early morning buzz of poor and immigrant labour cleaning the beautiful buildings of

Bloomsbury.

Meanwhile, the etching of the cotton mill reminds students of the work we have already done in the module on the textile industry and the ways in which their own lives are tied into global flows of consumer goods through their humble t-shirt (Rivoli, 2015). We have already read about the history of this industry and the lives of women who work in textile factories, so students are well aware of the hardship of nineteenth century life in the cotton mills. They tend to agree that the women (and one young girl) in the image are poor and to make links between the latter's lives and the lives of contemporary women in Bangladesh or Cambodia doing similar work. They also notice, though, the sociability of the lives, the fact that money is being handed directly to women and the nice shawls that some of the women are wearing. This is a prompt to discuss Rivoli's argument that women have gained significant independence and escape from grinding and isolated rural poverty through the opportunities offered by the textile industry, albeit in jobs that were structurally violent and often deeply unpleasant. Through an imaginative identification with women working in these sorts of industries, including a nuanced understanding that there were pros as well as cons to this sort of work, students may get beyond a patronising or pitying attitude towards the poor and begin to think more deeply about the political dilemmas posed by trade, industrialisation and the never-ending onward march of the textile industry around the world.

This image also provides opportunities to discuss why there are no longer cotton mills in Britain and some students talk about their own towns and cities, which sometimes prompts me to refer to my own background in an erstwhile Lancashire mill village. The grief, loss and declining standards of living associated with deindustrialisation and the disappearance of factory work in the Global North is a useful prompt to keep thinking about the spatialisation of work and poverty and remind us of the work we have done on poverty and disadvantage in the Global North. Using the exhibition space as an informal location for conversation and discussion, as we develop our interpretations of the works in front of us, enables students to link these old images to their own contemporary lives and experiences.

What happens in the gallery

As the preceding discussion implies, what happens in this exhibition is quite different from what one might observe in an ordinary art gallery exhibition, where visitors go to enjoy the aesthetic experience of seeing pictures and perhaps to chat to friends and enjoy their leisure time. Students are hard at work in this exhibition, with guidance from the worksheet and in conversation with me and their peers. Students tend to show up with their friends from the class and often also bring along other friends who aren't taking the module. I am there all afternoon, asking questions, giving information about the art and the context in which it was made, and helping to facilitate discussions. My presence in the gallery is crucial because students need information and guidance to help them start asking some of the critical questions indicated above. For example, whilst there is no "right answer" to the question of whether some people "deserve" to live in miserable conditions because of their own refusal to work or whether it would be preferable to distribute resources on the basis of universal entitlement, students cannot be expected telepathically to know that a discourse of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor emerges historically at a

particular moment and had certain consequences. Students need assistance in making the links between these textual arguments and the details of the art works.

However, the social expectations of a gallery produce a space and atmosphere that is different from a classroom and enables a different kind of creative engagement. Informal, personal conversations enable students to make links with their own lives and experiences. The act of standing side by side in front of a work, struggling to give it meaning together, disrupts the formal expectations of the classroom and allows for a different kind of conversation. This includes the valuable opportunity for both me and the students to have extended individual conversations outside of the time constraints of office hours and the formalities of seminar rooms. The free-flowing nature of a gallery and the ability to fall silent or move away to the next work makes this a different kind of discussion and one that is both pleasurable and constitutive of a strong microcosmic community of practice.

The worksheet also offers students some advice about how to engage with the art. Whereas a look round any public gallery reveals that most visitors spend just a few seconds in front of each work, I wanted the students really to engage in detail with the works and develop their skills of observation and analysis. I therefore kept the exhibition fairly small, with plenty of seating, and advised them to prioritise looking in detail at one or two works if time was short and they couldn't spend a long time with each one. I encouraged them to sketch the works or spend a few minutes writing down everything they noticed about them. It was very pleasing to see students sitting in the gallery carefully copying the works as they thought about them. I also noticed students taking several pages of notes in response to the worksheet prompts and taking their time to look closely at the art and engage in lengthy conversations with me and one another. The students all seemed to find this a pleasant and interesting experience and no-one expressed any resentment at having to be there. Students tended about half an hour in total in the exhibition, although every year a few stay for an extended period or even all afternoon. My impression every year is of a pleasurable, intriguing experience for me and the students.

Follow-up in class

On the Friday immediately after the exhibition, we all reconvene in class. This starts with a one-hour interactive lecture, in which I return to ideas from the readings about the "colonial framing" of development images, this time focusing on famine imagery, and discussing the similarities and differences between today's famine imagery and colonial images of famine, which were often used to justify continued British rule (Nag, 2010, p. 230). I also use David Campbell's (2012) writing about famine imagery to put the case that famine imagery often elides the politics that produce mass starvation. I conclude by challenging students to imagine a way of making poverty and famine visible through practices of representation, like art or photography, in ways that illuminate, rather than erase, the broader social, political and historical context. The lecture, then, make links to the exhibition by showing the formal and substantive similarities between contemporary famine imagery and the older artworks, and offers some examples of the consequences of the politics of poverty imagery.

All students then attend a one-hour seminar in which we bring together ideas from

the readings, lecture and exhibition. This is an opportunity to make links between the contemporary images of famine, the colonial photography and the artworks from the exhibition. Students are usually able, by this point, to see that the images that surround them every day have a complicated history that is not natural or inevitable but draws on various traditions that may contribute to a particular framing of poverty. Students tend to conclude that this framing is colonial, linked to industrialisation and premised on the idea that individuals should be engaged in economically productive work to avoid poverty. Many also note that it is a framing that detracts from the ways in which the institutions of the Global North do not merely “help”, but are also implicated in the ongoing production of poverty and famine, through relationships of trade, debt, aid and policy.

The question of how we might contest these powerful images is of course more difficult, but students often do come up with creative ideas, suggesting craftivism,⁶ storytelling, documentary film, and techniques like “photovoice” (Bananuka & John, 2015), for example, to draw attention to the politics of poverty. Of course, these ideas are also subject to critique within the class, and not infrequently we conclude by agreeing that critique itself, as an ongoing and creative activity, is central to the repoliticisation of poverty and our ability to be critical consumers of images. Students can do more work on critiquing images, if they so choose, in the module assessment.

What do the students say?

This module tends to be a popular choice with students overall. Students are asked, as part of our regular institutional monitoring, to rate the module in terms of their satisfaction from 1 to 5 (with 5 being the highest satisfaction rating) and the module always scores above 4.7. In the most recent survey (n=28), the mean satisfaction rating was 4.73, against a mean for all undergraduate modules in the department of 3.71. The median was 5, against a departmental median of 4.7. In the qualitative comments, eight of the 28 respondents referred to the module as their “favourite” or “the best/most interesting” they have taken part in. The tone of the comments overall is brimming with enthusiasm: for example, “every week I looked forward to [the] classes and am sorry they are over now.”

Whilst the exhibition is by no means the only reason for this good showing, the qualitative comments are revealing. One student complained, in response to the question on what should be improved about the module, that there was only one exhibition and there should be more. Another student mentioned the use of teaching materials, remarking positively that “instead of just using journal articles [the tutor] included videos, films, documentaries and art exhibitions on the reading list”. No-one made a negative comment about the exhibition even when given the opportunity to make anonymous comments, despite the additional time commitment it had demanded of them.

In light of the overall objectives of the module as a whole, and the exhibition in particular, it was pleasing to see students remarking that they enjoyed “being challenged to think in a different way” and “to challenge many things I had taken as given” as well as “[being made to] think harder about the assumptions I make about the world”. Students write, positively, about the module being “challenging” and

having to “think hard” and feeling “stretched”, which is reassuring as the intention of the exhibition was to educate and engage, not just entertain. Two students mentioned that they had learned skills that would be “personally enriching” or useful “for the rest of [their] life”. I certainly hope that they will take their creative participation in practices of critique into other areas of their lives in the future – this seems axiomatically what an education should be for.

Students also mentioned a sense of community and inclusion and feeling empowered to participate in discussion. I take all this to mean that the practice of critique and interpretation we were jointly engaged in jolted them out of the things they already knew and took for granted and engaged them in new relationships with the world of images around them. Priya said:

The course has been invaluable for providing structure to thoughts that have been subconsciously going on in my head, as a politics student, for a long time! It really challenges assumptions and thought patterns that can easily be fallen into, and invites a critical interrogation of practices of international development

As Agathe furthermore remarked:

The nature of the art exhibition facilitated this reflection. It gave me an opportunity to talk to other students as we discovered each artwork, exposing me to their ideas and forcing me to formalise my own.

Whilst the whole class was a microcosm of a community of practice, the flow and sociability of the exhibition cemented relationships and allowed for an atmosphere of joint critique and debate which is central to situated learning.

Conclusion: Creativity, Knowledge and Critique

I began this article with a quote from Matilde about the new set of metaphorical lenses she was using to look at the world of images. In the same email, she also mentioned that she had just had lunch with a few other former students from the module and that they had been discussing ideas from class in relation to their lives. This vignette nicely illustrates the key arguments I have made in this article. I have used the work of Lave and Wenger to suggest that knowledge is a practical matter that exists only insofar as we use it to solve problems and that it is the emergent property of the community who use it. In entering into their own critique of received ideas about poverty and development, Matilde and her friends demonstrate that they have achieved a degree of independence in their learning. Nevertheless, their knowledge is still materialised as part of a community of practice, rather than the individualised cognitive property of each of their brains: they no longer need me or my worksheets to facilitate their work, but they are still proceeding by entering into concrete interpretations of particular examples of discourses in the world. Furthermore, like Hoadley’s photocopy engineers, they do so by continuing, creatively, to swap ideas and tips about how to go about the work of interpretation.

I have also suggested that when we look at images, we enter into knowledge practices by making interpretations and drawing conclusions. Students come to my class with a set of lenses already: a range of ideas, concepts and attitudes that are

the product of interpretations of the world that they are hardly aware of as interpretations, so automatically do they partake in a community that knows certain things about poverty and development. These metaphorical lenses are always conditioned in part by the images that surround us in our highly visual culture and that enable us to see certain things whilst they render others invisible. It is my job to offer those other pairs of lenses that will reveal their interpretations as just that and make possible a critical reading of their former knowledge practices. I do this not through abstract argument, but by asking them to stand in front of images whose meaning they thought they knew and consider, concretely, what is not visible, how relations of power are materialised, and what the history of this genre of picture might be.

Louise Amoore has written, in a different context, that it is an urgent political problem in our contemporary lives – lived so much on screens – that we develop the ability “to intervene in what we do not know in what we see, and to mobilise a different form of attentiveness” (Amoore, 2009, p. 25). By continuing to develop their skills as critical readers, confronted by particular opportunities to interpret and ask questions, these students are learning to do just that. When they stand in front of an image that centres white bodies and uses black and brown bodies as a counterpoint or backdrop, in future, they may have the skills to notice whose experience is being elided and who is being constructed as having effortless expertise. When they see poverty described as the result of individual fecklessness, they can pay attention to the long history of the idea that poses as common sense, and wonder what other ways of paying attention to poverty it might behoove us to try. When they look at a well ordered cityscape, they can wonder about the lives they cannot see or know about, because they are not pictured.

Whilst some students find this an almost painfully demanding process, most are very positive about it, embracing their role in a different community. They sometimes express frustration at the difficulty they have in persuading their friends who haven't taken the module to see what they previously did not see but now find obvious. This is intriguing because it shows the role that communities continue to play in our knowledge practices and the obstacles to changing broader epistemologies single-handedly.

One student wrote in her essay that, as a consequence of her engagement with development imagery: “As I continue to learn more about the issues in development [...] I feel I have undergone an emotional transformation – there are many things I simply cannot unlearn”. It is these sorts of transformations that we are aiming at in Higher Education. After all, no-one wants their students to forget everything we taught them or engage in rote memorisation.

In conclusion, then, there may be many reasons to work with students in art galleries. I have here argued that in the social sciences, and any other discipline where we might want to foster the skills of creative interpretation of images, it is possible to engage students in just that work by getting them to stand before works of art and offering considerable scaffolding and support, preferably in the context of a whole module that aims to build on those skills. It is my hope that students who do take part in such activities will continue paying new forms of attention and generating their own creative critique in their future lives.

¹ My thanks to Nick Grindle, my colleague at UCL, for very helpful discussions on the state of the art in object-based learning and for encouraging me to write this article to contribute to the gap in work on teaching in art galleries. I am also very grateful to my colleague, Thomas Kador, and to the UCL Art Museum for all their help in putting the exhibition together."

² <https://www.radiaid.com>

³ <http://www.barbiesavior.com/>

⁴ Sarah is essentially right here: the production of the categories of "deserving and undeserving poor" emerges around the time of the Agrarian Revolution and enclosure in Elizabethan England and intensifies through the industrial revolution. However, the attempt to sort the poor into the deserving and undeserving was first enshrined in law in the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 (Shilliam, 2018). My thanks to Rachel Jones for drawing my attention to this point.

⁵ See the database at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs>

⁶ See <https://craftivist-collective.com/>

⁷ The qualitative comments reveal that one student gave relatively low scores because they were unsatisfied with their mark, which may have brought the average down for reasons that are arguably unrelated to teaching quality.

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Appendix 1: Object List

Object no.	Artist	Title	Date early	Medium
360	Cranach, Lucas, The Elder	St. Gerome in Penitence	1509	Woodcut
1729	Rembrandt van Rijn	Beggars Receiving Alms at the Door of a House	1648	Etching
2069	John Smith after Godfrey Kneller	Mary, Duchess of Ormond	1702	Mezzotint
698	Flaxman, John	"Feed the Hungry"	c. 1795	Pen and ink with grey and brown wash over faint pencil outline
8032	C.J. Grant	Slave Emancipation; or, John Bull Gulled out of Twenty Million	c. 1833	Woodcut
4587	George Sidney Shepherd	London University from Old Gower Mews	1835	Watercolour over pencil
1338	Jacomb-Hood, George Percy	Pay Day in a Cotton Mill	c. 1880	Etching
3028	Harmar, Fairlie	Old and Helpless- Saint Pancras Workhouse	c.1900	Pencil, Watercolour and Tempera
7905	Shah, Jamal	'The Tramp who gave his Clothes for an Umbrella'	1987	Etching and aquatint