EXHIBITING THE WRITTEN WORD

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Making Our Connections Project Team

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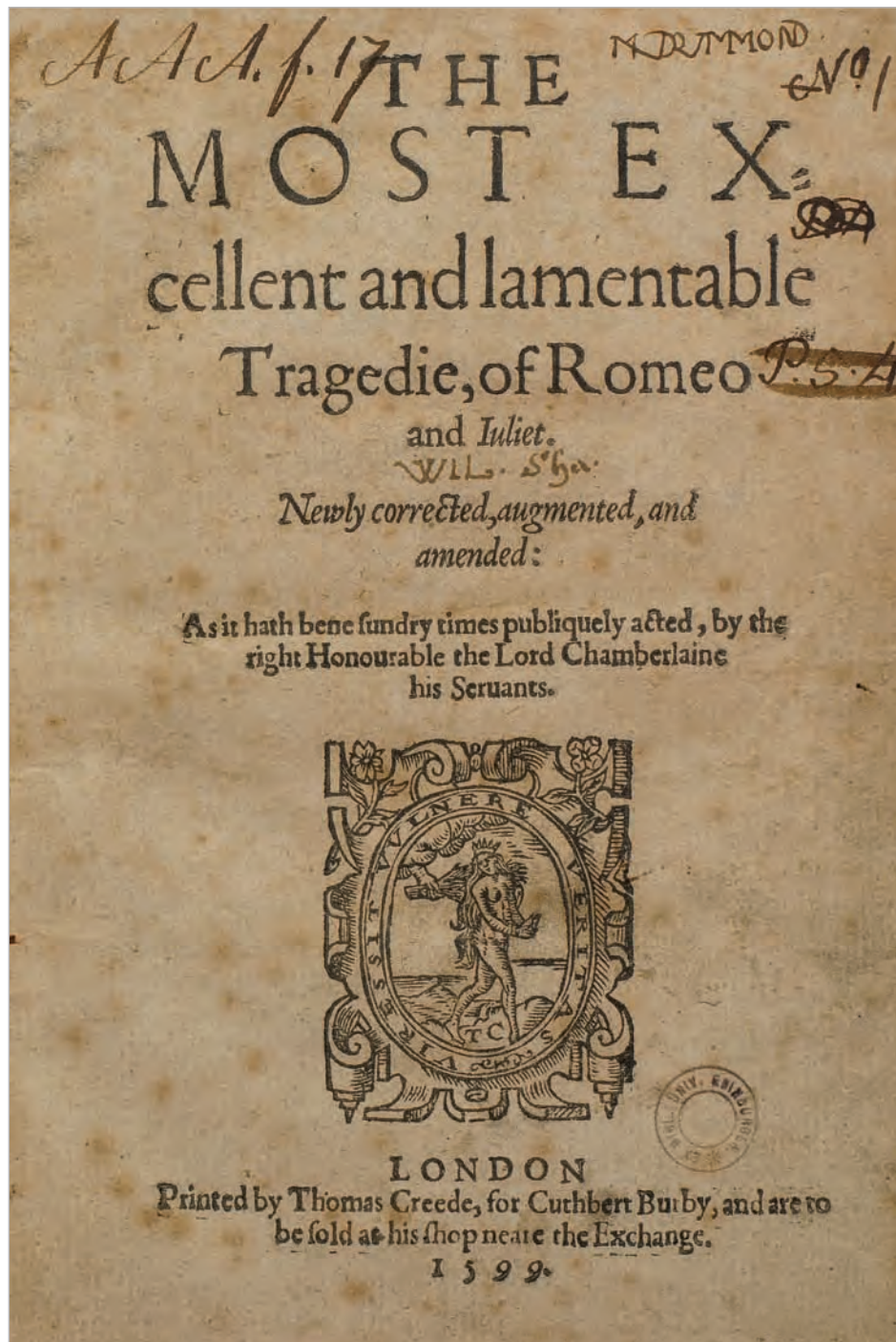and Humanities Research Council

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THE MOST EXcellent and lamentable Tragedie, of Romeo and *Iuliet.*

Newly corrected, augmented, and amended:

As it hath bene sundry times publiquely acted, by the right Honourable the Lord Chamberlaine his Seruants.

LONDON

Printed by Thomas Creede, for Cuthbert Burby, and are to be sold at his shop neare the Exchange.

1599.

INTRODUCTION

What are the particular challenges involved in staging exhibitions of books, manuscripts and other written materials? What, too, are the possibilities? While such exhibitions might not be inherently more difficult to curate than any other kind, there are some features and aspects of the written word that add a unique slant to the generic demands and objectives curators encounter. The exhibition of books and manuscripts often also engages or connects with specialist academic expertise – but those specialists are not always attuned to the principal pressures, demands and possibilities of curatorial work. This document arises from the experience of professional collaboration on exhibitions between academic specialists and curators, and from a consequent recognition that those practically or prospectively involved in curating exhibitions of the written word, whatever their professional background and experience, might find a discussion of the issues and contexts helpful.

EXHIBITING THE WRITTEN WORD

Although it is increasingly common for books and manuscripts to be put on display as part of the changing remit that libraries and archives have to engage with the community, there has been little reflection on the challenges of displaying the written word and how such displays differ from the display of art and museum artefacts. By becoming aware of the issues specific to the display of text, curators and researchers will hopefully be able to engage with the process of selection, interpretation and presentation with greater confidence that what they do is appropriate for the material and for those with a stake in it.

The word in a glass case

Words are not normally uttered, written or printed with the intention that they should end up in a glass case. Language is a different kind of communication system to that embodied in a work of visual art. It could be argued that an art object's purpose is fully realised when it is placed on display and viewed by a succession of gallery visitors. The artist meant their work to be seen, and as long as the setting and interpretation are suitable, and an appropriate level of engagement contributed by the visitors, in exhibiting the object we have fulfilled the maker's intentions. It is different with the written word, which is normally produced to be read as a piece of text rather than gazed at as an object. Books, newspapers, letters and diaries can be read in different ways – silently and in private, out loud to a group, cover-to-cover or in snippets. But reading, in all its different forms, is still a fundamentally different activity to that of viewing an object in a museum or a gallery.

What's more, reading is not something that is naturally facilitated or even permitted by typical exhibition conditions. In the case of a book in codex format, it is not physically possible to show more than one opening at once, unless the drastic decision is taken to disbind the volume. When a book is strapped open in an exhibition, visitors are often seeing only a tiny fraction of the content. An exhibited page is a frozen part of a sequence. Unless extra interpretive materials are provided, visitors are unable to read more than the text on the pages displayed. If, as is typical in a library exhibition, the openings chosen for display are those which are most striking or visual (e.g. the title-page or a coloured plate) there may be hardly any text available in those openings. Moreover, the text may not be easily readable; it may be written in a difficult hand or displayed under low lighting levels. By taking a book from the shelf and putting it into a case rather than into the hands of a reader, the curator is essentially preventing the work from performing its normal function, which is to be read.

Viewing and reading

This does not mean, of course, that exhibiting the written word is such an unnatural activity that it should not happen. It can be argued that in being displayed certain books are made available to far more people than the handful who might be able or willing to visit a research library and read them. There are ways, as will be discussed, of displaying books that give visitors opportunities to read in the exhibition context and incentives to do so at other times. Modern technology can be very helpful in this regard. Nevertheless, it is important for those involved in planning exhibitions to recognise the tension involved in putting the written word into a context for which it was not intended.

An understandable move would be to select items which can behave more like objects than texts. For instance, it is possible to put on a display of books without showing their textual content at all: books can be shown closed, especially if they have interesting bindings; a document can be shown rolled up with its wax seal; a letter can be incorporated into a montage of a writer's desk with pen and inkstand. At times, depending on the theme and audience of the exhibition, this can be appropriate. For instance, in an exhibition about books with interesting provenances it could well be more relevant to talk about the material evidence about the use to which those books were put than to talk about the words they contain. However, there are challenges with this approach. In an exhibition which has art objects and books displayed as talismans or art objects, any text that is displayed as such is at risk of looking second-class. Equally, there is the issue that such displays might misrepresent the nature of the books on display and the collections of which they are instances. An emphasis on showing beautiful but exceptional artefacts can lead visitors away from understanding the nature of a library or archive collection and from engaging with the important texts it contains. There is the risk that this approach limits the kind of exhibitions that can be mounted – it would be difficult to tell all the complex stories of the world's words by relying solely on visually attractive books.

The place of interpretation

Yet situating the visitor as reader presents its own challenges. If written works in an exhibition are accompanied primarily by written interpretation, this can make the overall effect very text-heavy indeed. Beverley Serrell, writing about the need for conciseness in writing labels, makes a telling remark: "visitors should be allowed to feel they are there primarily to look and do, not to read". (Serrell 125). This indicates how an exhibition of the written word which tries seriously to engage with texts and reading could upset the expectations of visitors more familiar with art or gallery exhibitions by overwhelming them with words. In an increasingly visual culture, visitors' concentration spans and willingness to read cannot be taken for granted.

It can therefore be argued that in an exhibition of the written word the interpretation provided – whether labels, panel text, catalogue information or audio clips - is particularly important. It is not generally possible to tell the whole story of any particular text, or to interpret it in ways that might appeal to every conceivable exhibition visitor. But the interpretation can potentially allow the

items displayed to exercise some of their normal functions by making available some of the content that is not visible or readable in the exhibition. As with any exhibition, interpretation provides context, adds information, guides the visitor and is essential to the creation of any exhibition narrative. However, unlike a typical gallery or museum, in an exhibition where the exhibits are textual there is potentially competition between the interpretation and the original on display – adjacent texts which may not be in full accord. This is particularly challenging when it comes to the display of provocative or controversial texts. When texts of religious, political or sexual significance are displayed, visitors may well be sensitive to all kinds of subtleties in tone and wording in both the original text and the commentary. How they engage with these texts may vary widely depending on their level of prior knowledge, their community's investment in the text and its context, their individual learning styles and on the act of reading they perform on the day of their visit. Experience indicates that there is ample scope for unexpected responses to interpretation of this kind, including reactions to silences and omissions. Particular care needs to be taken when planning and writing interpretation if it can potentially conflict with the texts on display.

CONTEXTS AND CHOICES: INTERPRETING THE WRITTEN WORD

How does a sense of the aims and context of a particular exhibition determine or influence the interpretative decisions that need to be made? Is there information about an item that must always be communicated, whatever the context? Are there aspects of the visitor experience that ought always to be encouraged? How might we handle the following examples?

These are designed to raise issues rather than to provide answers. The items selected are textual items that present challenges in terms of display and interpretation, whether because the content is hard to read and interpret, or because there is something inherently controversial about the subject matter. The different imagined interpretive strategies are offered up for criticism rather than as "how to" examples of best practice.

CASE STUDY 1:
THE HISTORY OF DAHOMY

The scenario

An exhibition on 'Scotland and Slavery' will contain many items about slaves in Scotland, the 18th-century campaign to abolish slavery in Scotland, and events in Scotland leading up to the 1807 Act of Parliament which abolished slave trading. This item will be the only example on display of a Scot arguing in defence of slavery during this period. Like all the items in the display, it will be accompanied by a label text which cannot exceed 100 words. If so desired, it may be possible to use an image from the book on an accompanying wall panel, with more interpretative text.

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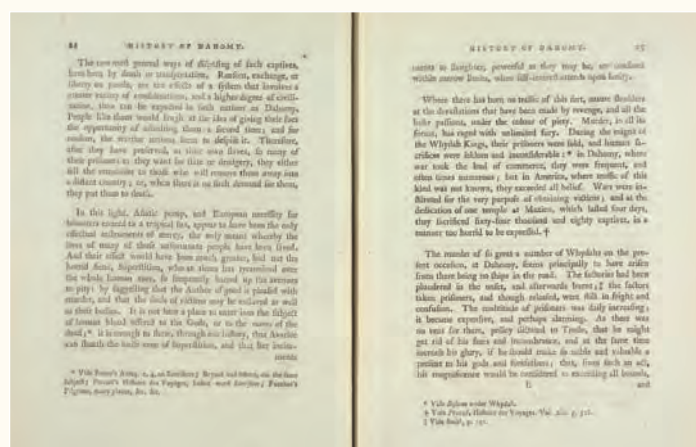
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The background to the book

Alexander Dalzel (1740–1818) was a Scottish doctor who after working in Africa as a surgeon turned to slave trading, of which he said in 1764 'I have at last come a little into the spirit of the slave trade and must own (perhaps it ought to be my shame) that I can now traffick in that way without remorse'. He spent several decades as a slave trader.

Dalzel's History of Dahomy was published by subscription in 1793. Based on his own experiences and on other histories, it describes in detail the practice of human sacrifice in Dahomey (then an independent kingdom, now part of Benin) and argues that the slave trade saved the lives of those who would otherwise have been sacrificed. In the 18th century the Kings of Dahomey sold African slaves to European slave traders in exchange for arms, alcohol and money.

Dalzel was one of many Scots who went to Africa to advance their careers. He served as Governor of Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast (1791-1802). His Scottish contemporary Zachary Macaulay, who spent some time as Governor of Sierra Leone in the 1790s after the abolition of slavery there, became a key player in the abolitionist movement and edited the journal Anti-Slavery Reporter.

Slave trading throughout the British Empire was abolished in 1807, but it had been illegal to own a slave in Scotland since 1778. However, Scots like Dalzel continued to trade slaves outside Scotland.

How should this item be displayed and interpreted? What would be gained or lost by displaying a striking image, what by displaying a key passage of text, and what by choosing to downplay the item by displaying an opening which in itself does not contain any controversial text or images? Should the item be displayed at all?

Possibilities for display include

1. The map and facing title page
2. Illustration showing the king of Dahomy holding court
3. Opening at pages 24-25: text arguing that slavery saved the lives of people who would otherwise have been human sacrifices

What might be the merits, the perils and the implications of each choice?

CONTEXTS AND CHOICES:
INTERPRETING THE WRITTEN WORD

CASE STUDY 2:
THE FIRST GAELIC PRINTED BOOK

This is one of the most important early books printed in Scotland – the first book to be printed in any of the Gaelic languages, in 1567. This is the only copy in Scotland, in Edinburgh University Library. The book is small, damaged and with browned paper, with dense text printed in Scottish Gaelic – which can only be read by a small proportion of the population. Here are two different scenarios in which it might be displayed:

• an exhibition in Edinburgh on the Reformation

• on loan to a local-government supported culture exhibition on a Scottish island where some people read Gaelic.
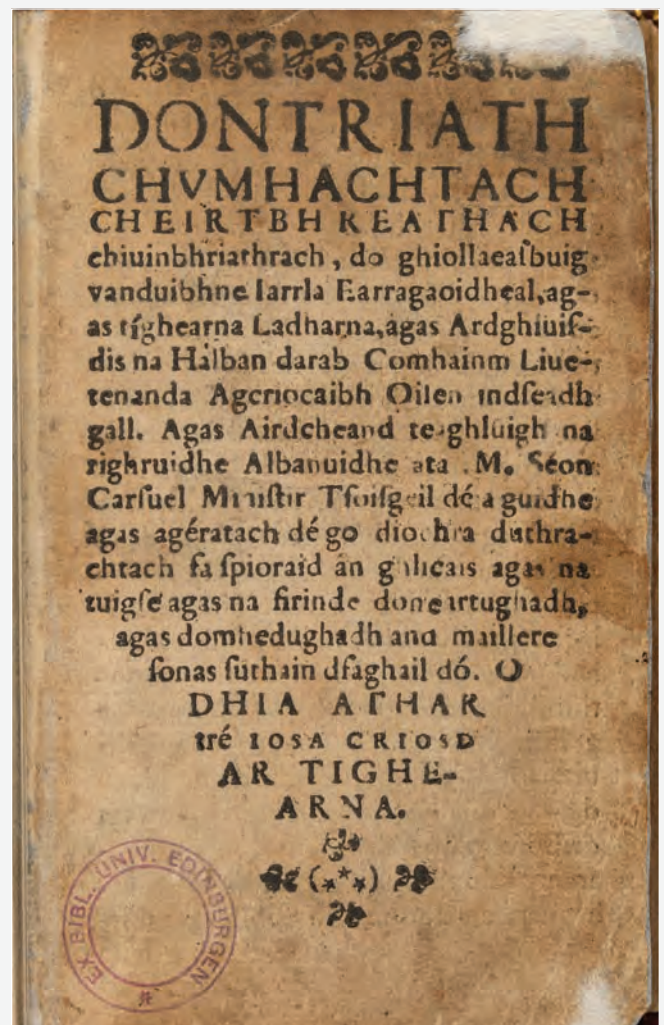
These are two labels that might be writtento accompany the exhibited book:

Gaelic Liturgy

Foirm na nurrnuidheadh agas freasdal na sacramuinteadh, agas foirceadul an chreidimh Christuidhe andso sios. [Edinburgh: Printed by Robert Lekprevik, 1567].
The Reformation reaches the Gàidhealtachd.
In the early days of the Scottish Reformation there was a strong impetus, sponsored primarily by the Campbell Earls of Argyll, to evangelise the Highlands and Islands, where Gaelic rather than Scots was spoken. John Carswell (d.1572), Bishop of the Isles, adapted John Knox's Book of Common Order into Scottish Gaelic. It was a hugely ambitious undertaking, particularly considering it would be another two centuries before the New Testament was finally published in vernacular Gaelic. This copy has clearly been well-used. Despite its unassuming appearance, this little book is of the greatest national importance: it is the only copy in Scotland of the first book printed in Gaelic – in fact, the first book printed in any of the Gaelic languages. Robert Lekprevik was the King's Printer in Edinburgh and he produced most of the works published in by and in support of the reformed Kirk in the 1560s and 1570s.

Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections Dd.10.44

This is a traditional, scholarly label which assumes a considerable degree of knowledge on the part of the exhibition visitor. The writer expects the visitor to understand the chronology of the Scottish Reformation and to know the significance of the word Gàidhealtachd, meaning the Gaelic-speaking areas of northern and western Scotland which were only nominally under royal control until well into the 16th century. The title is not translated and the visitor is expected to be able to work out that the Gaelic version of the Book of Common Order is the actual book displayed. There is no attempt to describe the opening actually on display and the label does not invite you to look. There are further issues with the length of the sentences and the appearance of the label as dense blocks of text. The use of abbreviations such as "d." for "died" and the library shelfmark also suggest an academic audience.

Foirm na nurrnuidheadh / The form of the prayers

Imagine if there wasn't a single book written in your own language. That's how it would have been if you lived on Skye 450 years ago. Even if you knew how to read, the only books were in English or in Latin.
So when in 1567 this small book was printed in Gaelic, it was an amazing moment. Now you could read prayers in a language you could understand, and join in the worship of the Church of Scotland. It's not surprising that this small book is very rare and fragile – it was read and loved by generations of people.

This is a more accessible, inviting label, although by these very qualities it risks becoming patronising.
It tries to evoke emotions such as curiosity and to stimulate a sense of identification with the past. However, it leaves out a large part of the historical story and does not give the visitor any clues as to where further information might be found. It is also surprising that the label is not itself bilingual, given the venue. Again, there is no attempt to describe or explain what the visitors can actually see.

Both interpretive approaches could be valid, with modifications, but they might both benefit from support in terms of other contextual information - for example, visual material showing the area of Gaelic culture or telling the story of the Reformation. To encourage engagement with the content, the exhibition designers could consider the use of transcripts and translations – possibly including audio.

THE GALLERY AND THE LIBRARY:
WHERE IS THE EXHIBITION?

Julie Johnstone,
Scottish Poetry Library

www.spl.org.uk

How do you have an exhibition in a space not designed specifically for exhibitions? The Scottish Poetry Library is an award-winning building, but it is a library. It does not have endless plain walls and long rows of exhibition cases.

An exhibition, whether curated by its librarians, or brought in from outside, needs to be adapted imaginatively into and throughout the space. A visitor may have come for the collection or to use the library – the exhibition is superfluous to their perceived need. They may not even notice it. A visitor drawn to the building for the exhibition alone may be initially confused. Where is the exhibition? Where do I start? As curator one asks oneself: does it matter if a library user or visitor only sees a small part of the exhibition, that they start viewing almost 'accidentally', that there isn't a 'traditional' start and finish viewing experience? Does it matter that they will be distracted away from the exhibition to look at shelves of books, or vice versa?

Any exhibition in the space needs to find a balance between standing out and being noticed, and not adversely impacting day to day library use. It must accentuate the experience of visiting the library, but not inconvenience or irritate existing users. It must sit well within the context of the library – quietly distract and intrigue, but also hopefully complement and encourage exploration of the broader context provided by the collection. Rather than a drawback, this potential dilemma needs to be viewed as a creative opportunity.

What is the purpose of the exhibition? Who is it for? How much of it needs to be seen in order to have been 'successful'? What constitutes a successful exhibition experience? Where should the exhibition 'take' the viewer? These are questions to be asked of any exhibition, but they are even more pertinent in a 'dual-purpose' venue. A recent exhibition cleverly used little ledges along the stairs to display bottles of whisky with short haiku poems attached on tags. A visitor can, if they choose, follow up viewing the exhibition by borrowing books from the collection on the haiku form.

When I curate an exhibition as Librarian, the purpose will often be to highlight an aspect of the collection. A blurring of boundaries between the exhibition itself and the collection that provides its context is thus desirable. An exhibition enlightens by itself, but also by illuminating its context. One cannot predict, nor should one, the way that enlightenment takes place and the connections that are sparked.

When I allow an artist to use the space for an exhibition, the collection provides a less direct context, but sensitive parallels and unexpected links will always arise. Some artists are concerned with the potential confusion and lack of 'pure' exhibition space, others will quickly embrace the special potential the location brings for creating a different type of exhibition, and in broadening the potential scope and understanding of their work.

Serendipity can be supplemented by written handouts, subtle numbering systems or floor plans, and on-hand staff expertise, but it is the serendipity that is important in the end. The exhibition, whatever it is, is surely about discovery – and being able to provide an immediate context to further that discovery is valuable beyond measure.

THE DISPLAY OF MANUSCRIPTS

**Jeff Cowton,
The Wordsworth Trust**

www.wordsworth.org.uk

Too often, phalanxes of manuscripts are displayed simply as vehicles for words where, ironically, an accompanying transcript is given priority by visitors impatient with difficult hand-writing on a faraway piece of paper in a dimly lit case. To the initiated, a row of a favourite author's manuscripts is something to dream of; to the uninitiated, such a display may fail to inspire even a wish to learn more. Important as words are, manuscripts have the added potential to create meaning, feeling and understanding through their physical make-up and condition. Fewer exhibits, chosen for their meaning from the 'thing' itself as well as their content, displayed in a way that captures attention and stimulates learning through close looking and investigation, may bring an exhibition to life for those who might otherwise pass by.

Take this pencil written journal displayed in the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising. It is in its own room, surrounded by images and artefacts of the horrors of war. Its plaintive and soft appearance, its recording of life's suffering is in sharp contrast to the background images of execution, and a single surviving sniper's rifle. In the chaos and rubble, where would the author find such materials, or time to write? How has this journal survived? This single manuscript – its words, materials and history and their combined emotional impact in this display setting – has a powerful effect that could not be generated by a typescript.

Isn't that the true test of a successful display? How much would the visitor lose in their learning if the manscript was removed and only our caption and transcript remained? A manuscript brings us close to a person and a moment in time. It provides a springboard for the imagination in ways that a transcript of its words can never do. It can put us into the time and place of its creation and creator. Visitors should be encouraged to spend more time on the manuscript, and less time on our words about it.

VISITORS, COMMUNITIES, AUDIENCES

Deciding what an exhibition will be about and how material will be displayed are not the only tasks that face curators: as the case studies here show, considering an exhibition's intended audience and why it should be staged are equally important. Often, indeed, it is reflection on these questions that provides the basis upon which selections are made, interpretation styles chosen and display decisions taken. An exhibition of picture books directed towards young families might be planned to encourage children's reading, for example, and would thus necessitate quite different choices to one directed towards scholars and intended to inspire research into the genre. Likewise, a temporary library exhibition designed to attract new visitors is likely to take a very different form to a permanent display aimed at members who use the venue regularly.

"We have to be clear about who exactly we are doing this for."

If establishing the who and why of an exhibition plays a key part in successful planning and staging, however, the task is not as simple as it might at first seem. In fact, there are numerous pressures on institutions to envisage their target audiences in particular ways, ways that may or may not overlap with the kinds of groups and individuals that actually use their venues. In recent decades, the imperatives of government policy have becomes stronger. These range from detailed legislation on duties of access and equality, designed to ensure that barriers preventing the participation of disabled people and minority groups are removed, to broader interventions in the form of policy statements and funding priorities. Between 1997 and 2010, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport published documents outlining the Labour government's vision. Drawing the rhetoric of social justice, they demanded that cultural institutions not only widen access through breaking down barriers but also actively tackle social exclusion, by targeting and pursuing particular demographics. So in the 2000 document, Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All we read that such institutions should "act as agents of social change in the community, improving the quality of people's lives through their outreach activities" (3) or, as the 2008 document Framework for the Future: MLA Action Plan for Public Libraries argues, institutions must put "the community at the heart of developing and delivering services, engaging with people and responding to their needs." (2) This sense that culture should empower communities and create change through encouraging the participation of excluded or marginalised sectors of society chimes with the current Conservative government's Big Society agenda, a 'call to action' that places emphasis on collective responsibility and community engagement. It is part of a larger shift in thinking about the role and function of culture in society based on the insight that responsibility for social welfare and cohesion does not only belong to the government, but is shared broadly across society and takes in more factors than simply economic deprivation. In this light, cultural activities are positioned as tools which, used well, can deliver "a sense of

belonging, trust and civic engagement, bringing far-reaching benefits including improvement in education and health, and reduction of crime and anti-social behaviour." (DCMS Culture at the Heart of Regeneration 4). Devolved governments have their own policy agendas, such as the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework, while local government and fundholder policies may be the main drivers which impact on some exhibitions.

"Cultural policies and funding policies are actually quite useful because they give us frameworks with which to articulate the value of what we do."

Policy agendas entail a shift in thinking about exhibitions. Their rhetoric moves away from the sense of a display as addressing an 'audience', a relatively passive body to whom cultural 'experts' speak, and towards a sense of dialogic engagement and responsibility for empowering 'communities', active bodies whose own voices are of equal importance to that of the 'expert'. This is also reflected in the publications, policies and ethics codes of professional bodies such as the International Council of Museums and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), which provide guidance on best practice and which also stress the social responsibilities of cultural institutions. Aiming to challenge the perception of culture and cultural bodies as elitist, this kind of instrumentalist approach can create confusion about the role of cultural institutions and professionals (O'Neill; Gibson) and about precisely how such participation can be facilitated and evaluated (Crooke), and has led to fierce debates about value and priorities (Holden). For many reasons, however, not least fundraising and accountability to the stakeholders involved, those staging exhibitions need to be able to engage with these agendas, in order to articulate and demonstrate the value of what they do.

In fact, these policy-driven agendas might be seen to provide as many opportunities as they do impositions. Operating in practice as "policies of production" (Gibson 248), they demand new ways of working and thinking about the assumptions we draw on when staging exhibitions, asking us "think differently about the ways material cultures are displayed in order to upset and challenge the hierarchical discourses of power that have traditionally shaped museum exhibitions." (Gibson 254). Asking questions about what would motivate people to engage with specific ideas and materials, and about what kinds of positive impact this engagement would have from their perspective leads to more reflective decision-making and to greater confidence in our own curatorial role and choices. Rather than thinking about how we might supply a given community with knowledge, thinking in terms of deficits, we can ask what assets they bring into the exhibition space and how we can mobilise these assets. (Falk and Dierking; Abrams).

"It's all very well to have great ambitions, but in reality resources are the biggest issue."

The emphasis on community engagement that characterises contemporary cultural policy is accompanied by a strong emphasis on collaboration and partnership working as key priorities. Collaborations present exciting new opportunities, allowing the sharing of resources, people, ideas and opportunities. At their best they allow institutions to work beyond their own limitations, and achieve much more than they would be able to individually. Exhibitions practitioners regularly work with donors, lenders and copyright holders etc.: working with the public in this way, developing projects that are "done with a community, not to a community" (Culture at the Heart of Regeneration 34) extends this practice in new and potentially valuable ways. In addition, recent developments such as the impact agenda in the UK higher education sector have meant that other sectors and types of publically funded institutions have begun to look to develop mutually beneficial relationships with cultural organizations and professionals. Importantly, by demonstrating the role that cultural institutions can play across different sectors, and from making applications with partners as lead bidders, funding from sources that were previously closed can be accessed: funding sources such as the Research Councils, Arts Councils (and equivalents such as Creative Scotland) and the Heritage Lottery Fund now consider well-planned collaboration as a key aspect of their awards criteria.

Working with individuals and institutions from different sectors has the potential to lead to conflict too, however, for different ambitions and priorities may be at play. An exhibition might be viewed as the culmination of a single project from one perspective and, at the same time, as one in a rolling programme from another. In such a case, one party's need to privilege short-term goals may sit uncomfortably with another's desire to segment ambitions and target specific audiences within a longer-term framework. Different institutions, funders and collaborators may also wish to target different audiences or communities, and ambitions regarding the scale of the intended impact—local, national or international—may also be at variance. These pressures may be even more complicated when private-sector sponsorship and collaboration is sought, adding concerns such as brand image and target markets to the mix. With more and more stakeholders involved, however, perhaps the most significant danger is that in attempting to satisfy too many criteria, we lose sight of why we are staging this particular exhibition and who is intended to benefit the most from it.

Generic learning outcomes

Translating and negotiating between the agendas of those involved in creating, delivering, visiting and evaluating exhibitions remains perhaps the central challenge of curatorial practice: thinking carefully about how a specific exhibition can address the concerns and issues of the stakeholders involved is vital. Over the last decades many case studies and examples have been published (see further reading), which show practical examples (although most come from the museum and gallery sector), and several best practice documents have been created (eg. Perkins; Abram.) One particularly influential framework for tying together strategies for interpretation or display and consideration of visitor engagement or responses is provided by the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) formulated by MLA in 2004. By focusing curators' attention on a five-fold categorisation of the visitor outcomes that an exhibition might aspire to achieve, the GLOs have helped those involved in making exhibitions to think across a wide range of effects or impacts that such exhibitions might have.

Thinking in terms not only of Knowledge and Understanding, but also of the other categories picked out in the GLO framework (Skills; Attitudes and Values; Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity; Activity, Behaviour and Progression) extends the definition of learning to cover most of the areas of visitor experience in which curators might hope their exhibitions were capable of having an effect. It also offers the prospect of some degree of clarity about the kinds of experience exhibitions ought to be seeking to promote. The fact that the GLOs are so generic, though, still leaves room for variety across exhibitions; it also means that the challenges presented to the achievement of such outcomes by certain kinds of displayed object – in particular, for us, the written word – which are less generic, but still more general than the challenges of any particular or singular item, remain to be properly formulated. While the GLOs have not been without their critics (Brown), this formulation of the task or field of the curator has been sufficiently successful as to lead to the outlining of Generic Social Outcomes, which map out the terrain in which an exhibition might have its effects more extensively and more ambitiously still, transcending rather than extending the boundaries of learning.

COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITIES:
SHELBOURNE FOOTBALL CLUB CELEBRATES
115 YEARS AT DUBLIN CITY PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Dr Máire Kennedy,
Dublin City Library and Archive

www.dublinsportsarchive.wordpress.com

Shelbourne FC was founded in Dublin's south city in 1895. Initial contact was made with the club through Miriam Leonard, librarian in charge of Staff Section. Miriam is a lifelong fan of the club and season ticket holder. I invited Christopher Sands, the person who covers historical topics for club programme notes, to give a talk at the library's annual Local History Day. In the course of discussions we realised that more than a talk could be done. The club was celebrating 115 years since its foundation, several of its former players had gone on to make a name for themselves with English clubs and as players for Ireland at international level, and many of the families of former stars still lived in the area.

An exhibition of photographs, books, programmes, posters, memorabilia and video clips was planned, and the launch of the exhibition included an illustrated lecture by Chris on the history of the club and its star players. A capacity audience attended and such interest was shown that the exhibition, which was meant to run for the week, was extended to one month. Audience members shared memories of the club and players, and we decided to investigate the possibility of doing an oral history project based around the club. Dublin City Archives have begun this project and have already recorded a number of interviews under the title Red Reminiscences.

COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITIES:
FAMILY-FRIENDLY EXHIBITIONS

Sarah Lawrance,
Seven Stories

www.sevenstories.org.uk

Seven Stories is different from many of the other organisations and institutions involved in written-word exhibitions because our core audience is young people and their families.

Our exhibitions focus less on conveying bibliographic information, and more on engaging our visitors with the full context of the book (what inspired it, how it came about), so that reading becomes a more meaningful and enriching experience. A key element is the inclusion of original artwork and manuscripts in our exhibitions; this 'peek behind the scenes' of a book provides unique insights into an author/illustrator's creative process which can help to transform the act of reading into something really creative in itself. There is no simple 'one size fits all' template for family friendly exhibitions; each one requires a different design approach, and provides new opportunities for engagement. For example, in our current programme, 'Through the Magic Mirror: the World of Anthony Browne' is a very different experience from 'There's Nuffin Like a Puffin: 70 years of Puffin Books.'

Our interpretative approach is built on practice – the experience of working with school and family groups, often in quite an intensive way, shapes what we do in the gallery and sometimes even becomes part of the exhibition. In our recent Judith Kerr retrospective exhibition we incorporated outputs from a participation project with a nearby school. A number of the children were refugees and were able to relate Judith's life experience, captured in her semi-autobiographical novel When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit, to their own. Making these links helped to make the children more curious, confident, creative readers. We captured some of this in a film, to share with a wider audience; this became one of the most powerful aspects of the exhibition.

Partnerships - both internal and external – are the key to achieving this rich mix, as we have a very small exhibition team. Our curators work hand-in-glove with our learning team; regular feedback from front of house staff keeps us on our toes. Outside the organisation, our exhibitions have benefited from the creative input of filmmakers Magic If Limited; we've also been working with national charity Action for Children, as a way of extending the reach and impact of the learning and participation work linked to our exhibitions. Looking for partners whose goals and values you share is the key thing here.

THE CHALLENGE OF EVALUATION

As with other parts of the life of an exhibition, evaluation practices have evolved largely through developments and research from the museums and galleries sector, with little if any work being done specifically on the evaluation of text-based displays. The kinds of evaluation which take place will be affected by the size and nature of the organisation(s) undertaking the exhibition, and the importance of that exhibition to their mission: a national institution with a dedicated exhibition gallery may be able to commission research into the impact of its exhibition programme; there may never be any formal collation of feedback about the changing displays at the entrance to a reading room. The public sector agendas and stakeholders outlined above may also demand specific kinds of evaluation in order to determine whether an exhibition has delivered their desired outcomes.

Quantity and quality

Even without stakeholder pressure to produce some kind of formal measurement of an exhibition's success, the merits of evaluation are clear: any exhibition aims to share something with an audience, and it is only through gathering evidence from and about that audience that it can be determined whether or not that sharing has been successful. The simplest kind of evaluation, and often the easiest to obtain, is quantitative: the numbers visiting an exhibition overall, or counts of particular visits such as school groups. There are also familiar simple ways to obtain qualitative feedback, such as a visitor book left open in a prominent spot near a display. Spontaneous and unprompted visitor comments can be as useful to exhibition curators as sets of statistics. For instance, the Dublin City Library and Archive exhibition described above was inspired by the comments made by members of the community who visited a previous exhibition.

More structured evaluation methods, which may be commissioned from professional market researchers, include the use of focus groups, visitor interviews, and the observation of the behaviour patterns of exhibition visitors. It is also possible to evaluate how successful an exhibition is in achieving some of the desired outcomes through observing visitor responses to interactive features, which show people's comprehension and engagement with the objects on display and their interpretation. While evaluation can be centred on a particular exhibition, it may be part of a larger programme. Such evaluation programmes can be particularly valuable for smaller institutions which may not have the resources to undertake them independently.

Evaluation over the longer term

One of the most difficult outcomes for which to obtain evaluation is to ascertain whether visitors have progressed from the exhibition to another activity which may
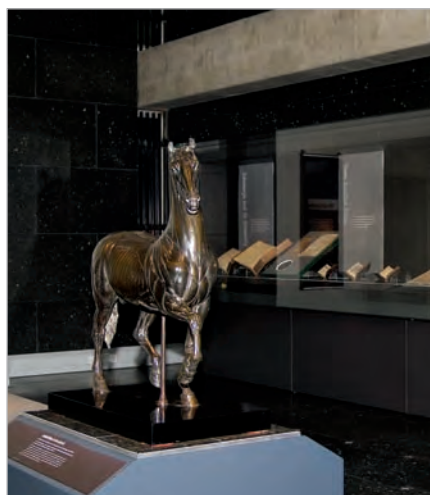
be a desired outcome. For exhibitions of the written word, where only a very limited part of a text is on display, further encounters with that or similar texts are often desired outcomes. How can any evidence be found as to whether or not exhibition visitors have gone on to further encounters with the text? In some cases, it may be appropriate to find a method of recording whether people have registered as readers in a library as a result of their visit, or to record the circulation of items related to the exhibition on a library cataloguing system. An associated reading programme for an exhibition may generate feedback such as evidence of how many reading lists have been downloaded from a website, or how many related books have been bought from particular bookshops. Reading groups may provide qualitative feedback or offer an opportunity for more structured evaluation of an exhibition's impact. In some cases the host institution for an exhibition may not be best able to evaluate what people read once they leave: perhaps connections may be built with other people and organisations which can provide this kind of evaluation, such as local Reading Development Officers or existing literacy research programmes.

Planning for evaluation

Evaluation strategies – what, who and how – are best set during the planning for an exhibition. Problems can arise when these strategies are set too early, because of the changes which may occur during the process of exhibition curation. The exhibition space available may change, the items displayed or interpretative themes may alter, work with or outreach to community groups may change shape. This can cause particular difficulties when 'success measures' are agreed with funding bodies or other stakeholders before curatorial work begins.

Margaret Lindauer outlines the history and theories behind methods of exhibition evaluation developed in the museum sector, but also points out some of the potential problems with what happens once that evaluation has been carried out:

> **Different stakeholders (exhibit developers, museum administrators, funding agencies, and audience members) may espouse divergent values. Policymakers and exhibition-developers can always find reasons (pursuant to their divergent values) to disregard findings that do not support their institutional, pedagogical, or curatorial agendas. (Lindauer 149)**

A different problem with evaluation methods is raised by Galloway and Stanley; they suggest that "it would be a backward step if, in the 'treasure hunt' for educational and social gains, evaluation reports were to disregard some unanticipated gains or over-emphasize generic outcomes at the cost of very specific outcomes" (Galloway and Stanley, 141).

Whereas it is possible to find books and articles which recommend methods of evaluation and which discuss the strengths and weaknesses of those methods, it is not easy to find reports of evaluations which have already been carried out, particularly for exhibitions of the written word. This document would therefore recommend that more attention is paid to the recording and sharing of evaluations of exhibitions of the written word across the different sectors where these items are displayed. Perhaps the 2011 integration of the Museums Libraries and Archives Council with the Arts Council will enable new methods of measuring the impact of text-based exhibitions to be devised, relating to the Arts Council's methods of evaluating its literature programmes.

WHERE NEXT? DIRECTIONS FOR CURATORS, COLLABORATORS RESEARCHERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

While we are not in a position to draw definitive conclusions, the research and discussion this project has engendered do point to ways in which the issues might be addressed in the future. Further lines of enquiry might include:

- **Exhibition spaces:** more consideration should be given to the library as the site for exhibitions, distinct from the more familiar gallery space and with different scope for access to collections than the more well-researched museum space;

- **Exhibiting texts:** an exhibition of the written word almost always wants to generate reading or engagement with texts, which leads to questions of how to promote that engagement in interpretation and in providing pre- and post-exhibition orientation into and out of the actual texts on display into texts which can be read outside the exhibition;

- **Interpreting texts:** exhibition visitors need 'orientation' around the text/s on display, so that they can 'read' what they see in some way – though this does not necessarily mean reading in the sense of silently reading and completely comprehending a text. Exhibition planning using Generic Learning Outcomes should include this as an objective under 'understanding';

- **Curating exhibitions:** is the curator an expert, a facilitator, or a collaborator with the community? Can they be more than one of these things at once? What weight should be given to potential reactions to the display of controversial items?

- **Evaluating exhibitions:** more work needs to be done to discover ways of measuring the impact of exhibitions of the written word, and where possible evaluations should be shared with the curatorial community, so that best practice can evolve.

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ONLINE RESOURCES (all accessed: 8.7.2011)

The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement
www.publicengagement.ac.uk
Dedicated to helping Universities to engage with the public, this site has practical advice and information on best practice, methods, collaboration, working with local communities, and funding for public engagement activities.

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk
Inspiring Learning for All is a self-improvement framework designed to help cultural institutions to assess their strengths and plan improvements. The site provides guidance on Generic Learning Outcomes and Generic Social Outcomes, as well as on measuring impact and effective evaluation.

Heritage Lottery Fund
www.hlf.org.uk/HowToApply/furtherresources
This page provides links to informative downloadable resources on various subjects, such as audience development, evaluation, learning, archives and communities and more.

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre
www.lateralthinkers.com/reports
Morris Hargreaves McIntyre is a visitor research organization specializing in evaluating the market and projects of cultural institutions. This page contains research reports on projects they have undertaken for clients such as, among others, the British Museum and the British Library.

Looking for Change, Tate Modern
www.tate.org.uk/modern/eventseducation/schools/lookingforchange
Designed to assist primary teachers engage their classes for gallery visits, this site contains a case study and a downloadable resource with suggestions for further activities.

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