Chapter 14
Technological Impact on Public Engagement in Alternative Educational and Heritage Institutions:
Portraying Minorities Through Interactive Exhibits

Natalia Moreira

ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1031-3508
School of Materials, University of Manchester, UK

Eleanor C. Ward

University of Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Cultural institutions and higher education establishments in the UK face significant challenges and uncertainties in the present and foreseeable future, particularly in terms of securing ongoing funding in a period of austerity. In an era of constricting budgets, institutions are encouraged to find creative solutions to generating revenue streams and demonstrating impact, which in turn, offers ample opportunities for innovation and mutual benefit through collaboration between the academic and heritage sectors. This chapter focuses on the 'REALab' consultancy programme, piloted and funded by the University of Manchester, which allowed a group of multidisciplinary researchers to address representation and inclusion of underrepresented groups at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester. The chapter is presented as a case study into the collaboration process between academic and heritage institutions. It will discuss the methods and success of the project and evaluate the importance of the interactive and innovative profile of the museum in the process.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, universities throughout across the globe have engaged in an impressive number of institutional initiatives and activities that promote multiculturalism in higher education (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). In an effort to promote research and cultivate ties with business communities, Universities have been given the backing of private donors and entrepreneurial partnerships with various corporate entities. Nurturing global networks and attracting talented students calls for Universities to explore the viability of establishing branch campuses globally (Lanford & Tierney, 2016). In particular, online education has changed the way many institutions think about how to deliver effective learning and teaching through innovative practices. Meanwhile, national governments have devoted much of their attention towards improving individual skillsets to meet the challenges of a knowledge economy, which in turn as persuaded tertiary institutions to develop new degree programs and promote inclusion through expanding access to students from previously underrepresented ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Jongbloed et al. 2008). However, it is often not as simple when defining the identity of a university campus, especially since the institution's culture is subjective depending on individuals' perspectives and motivations. Therefore, the topic of institutional culture has garnered much attention recently special, particularly in higher education studies.

Cultural institutions and higher education establishments, particularly those in the United Kingdom, face significant challenges and uncertainties, particularly in terms of securing ongoing funding in a period of austerity (Summers, 2009). In an era of constricting budgets, it is more essential than ever that these organizations can demonstrate appreciable public impact and value for money in their activities. However, the current climate offers many opportunities for innovation and mutual benefit through collaboration between technology and heritage sectors. In summer 2015, the Museum of Science and Industry (MSI) embarked upon an experimental project with REALab, a pilot consultancy programme made up of PhD students from the University of Manchester. The groups that joined REALab were in competition with each other, working towards a 'Dragon's Den'[1] formatted pitch. The program, founded by Rosalinda Quintieri, a PhD student at the Department of Art History and Visual Studies of the University of Manchester, aimed "to provide engagement and consultancy skills training and opportunities for PhD candidates and provide non-Higher Education institutions […] with access to appropriate and targeted research expertise to support sustainability, cultural innovation and social value" (Quintieri, 2015).

This pilot tested the benefits of student PhD-led consultancies as an innovative approach to consultancy work. Quintieri notes during an interview:

When I thought about REALab my main priorities were to allow interfaculty/interdisciplinary work, provide professional training not easily accessible to PhDs through the main internal providers, work with an array of different organisations (cultural, third sector, social enterprises) and allow the possibility through the program for the organic development of a trustworthy professional relationship between partners and researchers.

The positives of this approach are reflected in the number of projects initially proposed by different organisations interested in having students with this specific knowledge profile. The novelty of this combination of interdisciplinary work and training provides a rich environment for development.

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