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L., Jude and P., Donna

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In Conversation: Thoughts on Public Engagement

Jude L. and Donna P.

Jude L. and Donna P. are employed as Customer Service Officers at Huddersfield Central Library. A primary aim for the Library is increasing the productivity of public visits by expanding their scope, resulting in an improved customer experience. As a component of their role Jude and Donna are engaged in a partnership project with Huddersfield Art Gallery (which occupies the same building), with a goal of increasing visitor numbers and enhancing the visitor experience. They collect and display library material (mostly books; fiction and non-fiction) as a response to exhibitions taking place in the Gallery and a number of the exhibitions that they have worked alongside have been for РОТОЯ. The following dialogue is the edited version of a much longer conversation held in the summer of 2013, addressing the notion of public engagement and its role in the public library service:

DP A colleague once said something that really resonated with me: Librarians used to be the gatekeepers of the knowledge held in libraries but now we are the facilitators, we no longer decide what the public can have access to.

JL So how do we enable people to choose what information and knowledge they want?

DP We stand back and then assist them if they need it. Our role is to do our very best to help every person who comes in the Library. It's not to stand there and go, 'shhh!' A public library's role is shifting — it's becoming an Information Centre. It's not just about books, it's also about access to online information. Information literacy is what's crucial to everyone to be able to operate in our society and what we're doing now is facilitating that literacy. People still come into libraries to read books and to teach themselves, but there's an online world that is also available now.

JL So how does that then tie into public engagement?

DP Because it's about what libraries are here for. We need to have a continuing dialogue with the public about what they need from us.

JL But who is 'the public'? It's everyone who steps into the Library, isn't it? That's what I decided the other day. But I'm 'the public' as well, aren't I? Even though I'm also the service provider. I'm still going back to public engagement. I find it a bit difficult to get a hold of because it is quite a big concept. It's about us being a community resource; we're an open access place, which I think is really important, and we offer a way of gathering information that you might not necessarily have access to. And you're right about the dialogue; I think that's really critical asking what people want and need from this service. Through various consultations, particularly the 'Your Library, Your Voice', we've said, 'we are offering this already, but what else do you want from the library?' And we're also saying, 'what can you do? Is there anything you can bring – skills, ideas or information that you've got; whether it's to run community groups, or poetry workshops,' and

that connects people with the library.

DP So we've got to engage the public to come inside the building, and once they are inside we are able to promote what's on offer, including the exhibitions in the Art Gallery. And that's what our project does; it showcases the programme of artist exhibitions in the Gallery.

JL Yes, we're attempting to show links between what somebody might be looking at in the Library, and how the Art Gallery might relate to this in a way that people might not necessarily realise. By making even tenuous links to things that are in the Library with the art in the Gallery, such as the subject of botany or cacti with Gil Pasternak's Future Backgrounds exhibition (April-July 2013), or shopping, linking to Jill Townsley's Sisyphus (January-April 2013), we hope people will be encouraged to get more out of their Library visit by visiting the Art Gallery too.

JL The Library is also engaging with the University because the artists in the ROTOR programme are choosing a reading list from the Library catalogue for our display. We are then in a position to tell the Library public that a number of books have been chosen by the artist/designer/curator. Reciprocally, the artists are engaging with the Library, and then we're using their engagement to further the engagement with the public. It's very cyclical.

DP Isn't that great when you think about it?

JL Yes, it's a really good idea! Another thing that worked really well was when our colleagues got involved by telling us what they thought about the exhibitions. They gave us great feedback and we got quotes from customers too, which we used to make a lively display. And by doing it in a short, snappy way: Maybe you see a quote such as; 'I never thought till rolls could look so beautiful', and that might be intriguing enough for someone to think, 'I've got five minutes, I'll go upstairs and take a look'.

DP Absolutely, intriguing! I think 'intriguing' is a good word here; intriguing things engage people. I also think the use of Dewey numbers (in the display) make classification appear less scary.

JL Yes and that very clearly links the relevance of the library books with the art on show.

DP 'Links', that's another word we've talked about!

JL Yes we did, that's what we're trying to do – link things to remove barriers and communicate.

DP Absolutely.

JL Also bringing the gallery out of the 'white cube' — taking it out of its usual environment, we're actually bringing it into a place where people are comfortable.

DP Yes, because sometimes galleries are scary, intimidating places and maybe that's why people don't go upstairs and maybe that's why they stay in the Lending Library .

JL If you're comfortable with the Library and then a little snapshot of the Gallery is put on view, then maybe it makes it easier to access.

DP If it's intriguing enough.

JL Yes, people looking at our display may think, 'what is that cactus about', or, 'what's that strange thing on that poster?' That's a form of engagement isn't it?

DP It is engagement; from the moment you have their attention it's engagement.

JL I think it's difficult to measure public engagement because generally we use footfall as an indicator. I know we can see whether people have engaged with the display because they take the books out and we can count the books taken out, but how do you measure how engaged somebody has been with the art? Or even whether they've actually read the books?

DP Well, we could measure it very specifically by the Art Gallery figures going up. Do you think we've encouraged many people upstairs to the Art Gallery? Is it up to us to measure how much people have engaged with the art?

JL All we can say is what we've tried to do.

DP Yes. Going to our display, picking a book, deciding to borrow it and read it. Particularly if people think, 'there's the display I wonder what's on here?' That's definitely public engagement.

JL Members of the public come into the Library and instead of going over to whatever they were

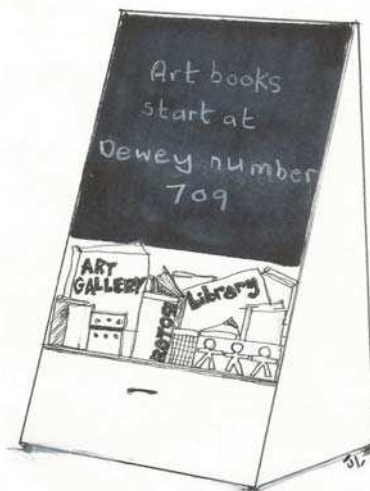
thinking of borrowing that day, their pathway is changed by stopping at the display. You could say we're adding value to their visit by encouraging people to make use of what else is on offer in the building for them to see and do. We often get books taken out from our display straight away don't we, do you remember that Jimi Hendrix book relating to Ian Massey's Patrick Proctor exhibition (August-December 2012) that just kept getting taken out and out!

DP So how are we going to wrap this up? What are we going to conclude? That the public is engaging with the books or the art just by stepping into the building?

JL I struggle with this because 'public engagement' is so broad a term, isn't it? Are we saying that 'public engagement' means just choosing to use a space in a certain way, or do the public actually need to make use of the building's facilities or services?

DP Open Access means anybody who makes the decision that they want to step into the building can step in, and in my view you are engaged because you've taken the decision to go into that space.

JL I think it's more than that; I think public engagement involves actual interaction with what's available, but how we actually measure that is another question.



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