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The Durga Puja pop-up exhibition at the National Museum of Finland

Designing and hosting an exhibition as university education-museum collaboration

ANNA WESSMAN, XENIA ZEILER, SUZIE THOMAS & PILVI VAINONEN

Abstract: *In autumn 2018, eight Museum Studies students from the University of Helsinki had the opportunity to put theory into practice and to gain hands-on experience making a real exhibition. The ‘Museum Content Planning’ course was a collaborative project between the National Museum of Finland and the university in which the students, together with the museum staff, built a pop-up exhibition about the Indian festival Durga Puja in only five weeks. The exhibition showed in the National Museum for two weeks, and the students were involved in most stages of the exhibition’s development. They also blogged about their learning experience. In this case study, we present our reflections on both the benefits and challenges of collaboratively creating an exhibition, which is simultaneously an accredited learning experience for university students.*

Keywords: exhibition, Durga Puja, museum studies, participatory education.

INTRODUCTION

The project *Digital Educational Tool Development: Durga Puja and Museums* was a University of Helsinki (UH), Faculty of Arts Future Fund project¹ led by the UH South Asian Studies professor Xenia Zeiler, in collaboration with others (Internet source 1). The project had various goals, one element of which was the creation of a pop-up exhibition on the theme of the Indian festival Durga Puja, in collaboration with the National Museum of Finland. We recognized early in the project

that this presented us with an opportunity to involve students in the process and to create a learning opportunity.

Museum Studies at UH underwent significant changes due to the new degree programmes introduced in 2017. For Museum Studies, the changes were far-reaching. There was, for example, a reduction in the total number of study credits available, and a shift from Bachelors- to Masters-level. This upheaval presented an opportunity to redesign the course contents inclusively, in consultation with both museum professionals and former and current students.

The result has been a study programme that implements more collaboration with partners, especially museums themselves. While the redesigning process as a whole has been presented elsewhere (Thomas *et al.* 2018), we look here at one particular course, which ran in autumn 2018. Our case study course was informed both by the findings of the Museum Studies redevelopment research (especially concerning the need to provide more hands-on experience), and the opportunity presented through the *Digital Educational Tool Development: Durga Puja and Museums* project.

As Seeger, Wall and Herr noted in their case study on teacher candidate training (Seeger *et al.* 2016) the model of learning from experience, and having hands-on access to materials, is incredibly valuable. Especially in Museum Studies, it is well documented that allowing students the opportunity to create and curate exhibitions is a powerful learning experience. Student-led exhibits “have the potential to empower student curators and their visitors to see how choices that museums make impact the way we interpret objects and understand the relationship between past and present” (Marstine 2007:303).

THE FESTIVAL DURGA PUJA IN INDIA AND THE HELSINKI AREA

The festival Durga Puja is one of the most popular and widespread festivals in India, and today Indian diaspora communities celebrate it globally – including in the Helsinki area. Durga Puja literally translates to “worship of (the goddess) Durga”, and its main features are elaborate public celebrations, involving many community activities. While the festival’s original modes of celebration, which lasted until at least the early seventeenth

century, focused on domestic practices and individual rituals with no hints of community celebration, today unquestionably the public puja dominates. Durga Puja took the present form of a mass event in the nineteenth century; it is probably the most popular Hindu festival.

The emergence of digital media since the late twentieth century additionally enhanced and partly transformed the festival’s social interaction aspects. Today, social media are critical in both organizing and celebrating practices (e.g., Zeiler 2018). Organizing groups and festival visitors make effective use of digital media to arrange splendid celebrations, to advertise them, to draw high numbers of visitors and to share festival experiences with others. Social aspects have almost always played a significant role in Durga Puja; visitors understand the festival as a social event as much as a religious one, and it is celebrated as such.

Helsinki’s first Durga Puja was held in 1999 and was a one-day, small-scale event. It grew to become a more extensive public festival, and presently two organizing committees with their rotating system of appointed responsibilities, including many volunteers primarily from the small Bengali community in the Helsinki area, celebrate. The central object of our Durga Puja pop-up exhibition was a Durga statue (fig. 1), which had been used in festival rituals in 2012–2016. It was donated to the National Museum of Finland in 2017 by the Pujari Finland Association (Internet source 2).

Durga statues in India are traditionally immersed in water after the celebrations. In Finland, this was not possible, and thus the Pujari Finland Association offered to donate the statue to a museum after they had obtained a new statue from India. Initially, the statue was offered to Vantaa City Museum, but they declined, arguing that it did not fit within their Collection Policy. After negotiations, the

statue was added to the National Museum's Independence Era Collection, in order to visualize multicultural Finland and a significant Hindu ritual.

The statue had been a sacred object of worship before it was handed over to the museum. It was thus treated with respect, both when the museum staff transported the statue to the museum collections department in Vantaa from the representative of donors in the Bengali community, and when it was put on display in the exhibition. According to the curator, Pilvi Vainonen, who took part in the initial transfer of the Durga statue upon donation, the representative of the community bid farewell to the statue with prayers. This reverence for the statue by Hindus, even when placed in a museum context, can be illustrated also by another example: The pop-up exhibition was open during the Durga Puja times, 16.-28.10.2018, and just before the Durga Puja exhibition opening, the museum's cleaner, who was of Nepalese origin, had offered bananas and chocolate to the statue. Moreover, every morning for the entire duration of the pop-up exhibition, she went to the exhibition room for *puja*.

In addition to the Durga Puja statue, some 20 other objects from the National Museum with a connection to Hindu ritual and the goddess Durga were on display. These were oil lamps, camphor plates, bells, drums and water vessels. Overall, the setting of the statue in particular aimed to recreate a setting similar to Durga Puja celebrations in India: the statue was placed on a recreated small stage surrounded by offerings such as flowers and fruit. The exhibition room additionally displayed sounds and colours (through video and photo slideshow performances) and informing objects such as posters of the goddess to create a lively and engaging atmosphere for museum visitors.

CREATING AN EXHIBITION AS PART OF A MUSEUM STUDIES COURSE: WORKING WITH FIRST-TIMERS

The Museum Content Planning course (5 ECTS)⁵ took place in English. Students had to be enrolled on the Master programme in Cultural Heritage (in which Museum Studies is one of several optional disciplines), and we asked that they had completed sufficient previous Museum Studies courses beforehand. The students also had to prepare by reading an article about Durga Puja (Internet source 3, Zeiler 2018). For the course to offer a meaningful experience, the intake was limited to eight; hence, there was also a waiting list to join the course. It meant that those accepted were highly motivated. The students were warned of the tight, intensive schedule when enrolling. It was important that all students were motivated and flexible; with such a small group, we did not want to have any drop out. Of the eight students, four had Finnish as their native language, one was a Finn with Swedish as first language, two were native English speakers permanently residing in Finland and one a Belgian exchange student.

The students were divided into three groups working on text, objects and multimedia. The students could indicate which group they wanted to join, but because most wanted to work with objects, the lead teacher, Anna Wessman, had to divide them more evenly. Wessman also enquired at the beginning of the course whether the students possessed any special skills, such as different languages, social media or computing, that could benefit the exhibition process. As a result, we learned that one student was an object conservator and one an artist, while another was an active blogger. The groups were thus divided according to personal preferences, skills and

*Fig. 1. Durga statue, donated to the National Museum of Finland by the Pujari Finland Association.
Photo: National Museum of Finland, 2018.*

language so that two groups included a native English speaker.

The course contained both seminars and practical work at the museum. In the six seminars, which took place on a weekly basis in the first period of the academic year (September until mid-October), the teachers (Wessman, Vainonen and Zeiler) provided background information about the Durga Puja festival, introduced the aims of the course and offered step-by-step lectures of the exhibition

process. This included information about collection work, how the process of writing the manuscript and the text panels takes place, working with translations of the texts,³ processing and printing images and texts, and, finally, preparations around the exhibition opening. The Ambassador of India, Mrs Vani Rao, honoured the exhibition by formally opening it.

The practical work at the National Museum was a crucial part of the course. We tried

to offer the students a diverse picture of exhibition design, knowing that they would have just a glimpse of it during the short time span of this course. We also dealt with some of the practical matters in class. This seemed necessary for the students, as some groups needed more reassurance while others merely wanted to report what they had been doing.

Because of the close collaboration with the National Museum, the exhibition process developed according to the museum staff's already-demanding schedules. Thus, students and university personnel had to be more flexible with their schedules than would perhaps usually be the case with more traditionally structured courses. Students sometimes had to participate in exhibition planning meetings at very short notice. Despite this, most of the students were able to show up when needed, even though this meant that they had to put their other commitments, such as studies and work, on hold (fig. 2).

The result of the course was the exhibition; the students did not sit an exam or do other 'typical' university assignments (Brown & Knight 2012). Instead, the course entailed practical museum work, such as writing and editing the exhibition manuscript, museum panel texts, object labels, blog posts about the process and using social media. The teacher evaluated based on the students' activity, teamwork and their project outcomes. All eight students earned the same grade because their performance was very good and none stood out from the others. At the end of the course, a feedback session took place with the teacher and the students. The students were also able to do oral self-assessment, discussing their own performances on the course in front of each other (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Thus, on a scale of 0 to 5, the students earned the second-highest grade – 4 (Very Good).

THE TASTE OF REAL MUSEUM WORK: LESSONS LEARNED

Creating an exhibition with students and a tight schedule is never easy. Nonetheless, the exhibition opened on time. The course was a rare and exciting experience for both students and teachers. According to student feedback, this was one of the best things in their studies and something they would do again. The museum had their own exhibition designers, who did most of the creative work, but the students were able to participate in the process by observing, presenting ideas, and discussing. They felt this was important for their future professional life: "Collaboration with a museum as influential as the National Museum has been truly educational and given us a taste of real museum work" (Internet source 4).

Some of the museum work remained invisible to the students. The preliminary artefact selection process had already happened six months prior because the objects needed conservation beforehand. The museum employees explained the process in detail for the students; however, hands-on experience is naturally always more effective (Holstermann *et al.* 2010). It is equally important to allocate enough time for the collaboration between students and the external institutions, something we need to develop for upcoming teaching (See Molin-Juustila 2019).

The museum personnel were also content with the collaboration and outcome. The pop-up exhibition had free entry and no visitor count devices, and thus we are unable to know how many people visited. However, anecdotal feedback from visitors was positive, and many highlighted the beauty of the displays. The students were able to see for themselves how an exhibition is developed and realised and



Fig. 2. Students and staff from the National Museum discussing the planned displays. Photo: Anna Wessman, 2018.

that it is truly collaborative work at all stages. The students also learned that museums are struggling with scarce resources.

The Durga Puja pop-up exhibition certainly presented for us – as university and museum staff – an opportunity to develop our collaboration to another level (fig. 3). It is not our first collaboration, and students have previously worked in the museum as interns, as well as receiving guest lectures from National Museum staff, and visiting as parts of other courses. In spring 2018, for example, students created educational resources for a different department of the National Museum as part of a *Museums and Learning* course. However, the collaboration for *Museum Content Planning* was deeper, requiring a high degree of trust

on both sides. Since the final product was then on display publicly, this gave a more profound sense of accomplishment, as the blog posts and student feedback testify (Internet source 5, 6).

Increasingly, museums strive to involve communities in their work, including the source communities from which their collections come. This kind of participatory approach to exhibition design is fruitful because the input from the community gives a more democratic and nuanced representation of the cultural context. But this approach also requires a lot of time and resources (e.g. Ciolfi *et al.* 2008, Davies 2010, Iversen and Smith 2012, Reitsma *et al.* 2014). As noted previously, the time allotted for this course was relatively short. It made it impossible on this occasion



Fig. 3. The finished exhibition during the opening night. Photo: Anna Wessman, 2018.

to develop a strategy for involving the statue-donating Pujari Finland community in Helsinki extensively. Nonetheless, such engagement would be a positive way for students to gain further insights from the Indian diaspora in Helsinki about the significance of Durga Puja for them, as well as developing an even closer relationship between the community and the National Museum. While the Pujari Finland community in particular and the Indian community in general were not involved in the course, their involvement in the exhibition itself was planned and organized, together with the National Museum and the Indian

Embassy. For example, details of the exhibition room structure were discussed with members of the Indian community in Helsinki, to allow for their preferences. Besides, they provided some of the showcased videos and photos and invitations for the exhibition opening were specifically circulated in the Indian community.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the course would have benefited from better scheduling, and in future, it would be good to divide it into two separate courses to extend the time possible. The first course

could focus on researching the objects and consulting with the community, and a second course on putting the exhibition itself together. Even though we all knew that this was an intensive course, we should have been able to empty our calendars of other engagements for the duration of the course, but this is never really possible as other work commitments are unavoidable.

The Durga Puja pop-up exhibition was a new experience, taking collaboration to a new level. Creating an exhibition together with inexperienced students turned out to be successful, despite challenges. Furthermore, implementing more extensive collaboration with partners outside academia is not only beneficial for the communities themselves, but also highly educational for staff and students. University education naturally strives for high academic standards and skills for the students but letting the students learn in a museum, placing their practice within a wider professional context and applied setting, is also related to later employability.

NOTES

1. This work was supported by the University of Helsinki, Faculty of Arts Future Development Fund 2018.
2. European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a standard means for comparing academic credits. 5 ECTS is equal to 140 hours of study.
3. The exhibition texts were trilingual (Finnish, Swedish and English).

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