



University of Brighton

Executive Summary

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Royal College of Art
Postgraduate Art & Design

RIBA 

V&A

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The purpose of this research was to provide a baseline of knowledge on how Design tutors and students were currently using the V&A's collections and to suggest ways in which the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning through Design (CETLD) could help the learning experience.

Key Findings

Motivations and Barriers to Visiting

Student users of the V&A typically visited the Museum in order to take in current exhibitions and in the course of the visit were likely to wander at random through the galleries. This wandering was often inspirational, but rarely planned. Royal College of Art (RCA) students based nearby were more likely to develop a close relationship with the V&A which they used as object reference, archive source and inspiration. For most students, cost, distance and lack of knowledge about the Museum acted as barriers. Not all students enjoyed the Museum environment, citing orientation problems, objects displayed under glass and high charges as disincentives to visit.

There were wider contextual issues at work as well. Many students actively preferred to take their inspiration from the high street rather than the Museum, excited by the range of objects and styles on display and the opportunity to handle and examine them close to.

The majority of tutors felt that while they could recommend specific exhibitions, especially if they had been impassioned by them themselves, it was not appropriate to require museum visits as part of their courses. There was also a philosophy endorsed by tutors and absorbed by students that museums represented orthodoxy, and the V&A strongly so. It was the job of the HE Art and Design Departments to undermine orthodoxy and create anew. The relationship of the HE Art and Design Departments to the V&A was therefore ambivalent. On the one hand the Museum was seen as 'a labourer in the same vineyard' and on the other, as an orthodox institution to be undermined.

Helping the V&A to Help Students

An offer by the V&A to help students was therefore not necessarily accepted at face value by the HE institutions (HEIs). The HEIs felt entitled to a more egalitarian relationship with the V&A, where both HEIs and Museum were involved in setting the agenda for learning, display and interpretation of the V&A's collections.

Whereas the Museum had seen the CETLD project in terms of providing resources to help students get the most out of existing galleries, the colleges were talking about a more participative relationship. They would like a hand in:

- Categorising objects
- Contributing to the display (with their own work)
- 'Hands-on' rights and privileged access behind the scenes
- Joint promotions, competition and sponsorship

In short, the students would engage with the V&A if the V&A was prepared to engage with them. The desired engagement goes beyond the provision of resources.

The climate of the Museum needs to change too, to place more emphasis on creating and making objects. This would involve more information on the nature of materials, the maker's perspective and 'hands-on' access to objects. There were implications here for gallery displays as well as for support systems outside the galleries.

The CETLD team had articulated hypotheses about students' needs from the Museum, prior to the study. Broadly, the underlying assumptions were:

- Students needed help to get to know the Museum
- Students needed better strategies in order to use the collections for purpose
- Students appreciated information expressed in different modes

- Learning to look at objects was a prime skill which everybody needed

These assumptions were borne out by both students and tutors.

More information is needed, however, on the use of PDAs in the galleries. Both students and tutors felt that the strength of the V&A was to offer a personal encounter with real objects and that audio and other PDA resources could limit and denature their experience. That said, students were more accepting of digital/web based images and material. In future the greater understanding of student needs through CETLD research will influence the way objects are displayed and interpreted in galleries. In the meantime issues of interpretation can be addressed through mobile technology such as PDAs.

Ideas for Future Development

Based on the foregoing analysis a range of ideas for development are suggested.

Helping students to get to know the museum better

- Confident V&A branding and self promotion, with displays in other public places, such as airports, shopping malls
- Specific invitations from V&A to colleges for introductory sessions to the galleries and archives
- A grants fund to finance student entry to exhibitions (which they have to earn by visiting the Museum regularly and getting points)
- A 'home base' for students in the Museum: social, informal, cheap coffee, onscreen guide to collections
- A 'student only' channel for reviewing exhibitions and galleries for one another.
- Tutors seminars to re-energise and re-inform tutors about the collections; sanctioned play time

Identifying better strategies for using the museum

Acknowledge the three stages of student development:

- Browsing for inspiration
- Researching projects and papers in the archives
- Designing and creating objects
- Offer (tactfully) resources and pathways which mirror these stages

For each current exhibition, identify links to objects in the galleries (surprising links if possible).

Set up 'find' screens in the entrances which will give a map and route to any desired object.

Set up temporary showcases where objects are displayed in relation to one another specifically to highlight topical issues.

Create a pathway for student dialogue with curators/exhibition designers:

- At the student home base
- Walking and talking amongst the exhibits
- A way to challenge orthodoxy

Helping students to learn to look

This was a very delicate area. Both tutors and students felt they had much to learn, but tutors in particular felt it was clumsy to try to teach this as a skill. That said, interpretation and displays could be set up to make certain kinds of insight easier to spot:

- Juxtaposing unusual objects e.g. set up a fruit machine to deliver three unrelated objects for comparison
- Re-categorising the collections in unexpected ways e.g. all things spiky
- Handling as a way of 'seeing'
- Bringing different perspectives to bear: maker, curator, designer

- Grouping design solutions to common design problems e.g. transitions in 3D space, transitions between materials
- Setting up a treasury of in-gallery tasks already tried and tested by college tutors

Providing information in different modes

Tutors and students agreed that a high percentage of design students were dyslexic and therefore written texts should only be one of a number of communication modes:

- More graphics and bullet points
- Single 'heroic' objects on display
- Website downloads, 3D photography made easier and referenced alongside the object
- Handling objects: exploring the properties of materials e.g. taking them to the limit
- Co-curatorship of displays and exhibitions
- Interactive walls for giving feedback
- Using the Museum shop as a study base

Sharing with students as they start their careers

- Display students' work through competitions and sponsored events
- Share skills on how to display and promote objects
- Discuss commercial skills, using Museum shop
- Share the joys and frustrations of museum work at the V&A