Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

An Open Letter to the Museum and Heritage Sector

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Abstract: The following letter is in response to the panel "All Ears? How Museums Use Community Advisory Groups to Listen and Act towards Local Relevance and Engagement," which was conducted on February 18, 2023 at the College Art Association and sponsored by the CAA Museum Committee. The transcript to the panel was circulated to museum professionals to respond to through the letter format based on their experiences and observations. This letter draws on Esther's experiences and evolving practices as a Community Engagement Manager.

Letter

What do we mean when we say engagement curation?

I worry our sector is consumed by a well-intentioned desperation to do the right thing in institutions that have been the wrong side of right for centuries while still retaining a semblance of control over 'curation.' In the "All Ears?" panel Rob Blackson called this process a "white-knuckle ride"—that is a fabulous phrase that I will pin above my laptop. Our efforts to shift the balance of power should not feel comfortable; they should feel terrifying, exhilarating, and, most of all, a risk.

I was asked to speak on this subject recently, and in preparation, I thought I would look up the term *engagement*. The definitions I found (including Oxford English Dictionary) reference "formal arrangements," "meeting at a fixed time," "combat," and "employment contract." The term originates from the seventeenth century when it was used to define a "legal or moral obligation." If I was asked to choose words to define the opposite of what I believe I do, those would not be far off.

In trying to define what engagement curation is, I had succeeded only in deciding that the term we had all landed on as mutually acceptable was one that I found less than ideal. What other words, I asked myself, would I find more palatable? Quite a lot of those on my list were key phrases that were repeated by the "All Ears?" panelists—listening, caring, trusting, reciprocity, connections.

Which of your relationships do these words define? For me, it is my friendships. Panelist Alyssa Greenberg described her work as "relationship builder and community connector."

I love this much more than "engager." Relationships feels like a more honest way to think about our work—organic and with both parties equally in control.

In his introduction, Daniel Tucker spoke about the increase of engagement in recent years and a 2015 report, which advocates for a move away from the "limited partnership models of previous eras." However, as many of the panelists say, this is difficult and does not often look like how institutions imagine. There is not always a 'concrete' outcome.

Again, that sounds like a relationship to me—an evolving 'thing' that one person alone cannot control, where the outcome cannot be known, defined, or agreed from the outset. This brings us neatly to the dirty 'P' word. As institutions we are trying to acknowledge 200+ years of power imbalance while at the same time being terrified of the white-knuckle ride that comes with relinquishing it. I believe the only way to do this is to fully commit, to trust your gut. It is like dipping a toe in, compared to doing a glorious, Olympic medal-winning somersault. We must be brave to do this; it *should* feel scary. It should not be a process we can control. It should be uncomfortable. How we can we ask people to trust us if we do not trust them?

I want to reassure people who do not work in engagement that this does not always feel comfortable for us engagers. I worked on a recent project that demanded I abandon or re-evaluate my curatorial and engagement practices. The project involved a local, voluntary community group curating a display about their musical culture. In one project it encapsulated almost all the modern dilemmas of arts engagement. How could we support the partner to learn from our supposed museum and visitor experience expertise while at the same time allowing the partner to retain ownership of decision making regarding how to share their stories? What financial value could we put on the partner sharing their culture with the museum and its visitors? How could we support staff who feel concerned about challenging processes when processes were made for an entirely different kind of project? Given all this change and conflict, how could we safeguard everyone's wellbeing? I felt like every step of this project was a challenge to my ethical beliefs about partnership. I did not make all the right decisions, but the experience reinforced for me the value of continually talking to staff, partners, and all stakeholders. I remember one evening, over a cranberry juice at a local pub, allowing myself to just listen to the community partner's frustration about our processes. I may not have been able to resolve those for this project, but by distancing myself from the need to defend, I have absorbed those frustrations and the trust placed in me sharing them will help me to communicate to the institution what we could do differently.

The "All Ears?" case studies that were shared were an excellent way to remind us of the breadth of this work and how important it is that we do not all work to the same model. How can we when we are advocating work that celebrates individuals and communities above institutions? However, they also remind us of difficulties that still remain in this field—payment and reimbursement of community partners; funding restrictions, especially for meaningful long-term work; safeguarding staff and community friends; professionalizing relationships; and institutional politics. What I think we need is honesty and transparency about what we are doing. Yes, I believe

relationships are the way forward, but there will always be an imbalance in those relationships when one party is employed by an institution and another is a volunteer or community friend. We need to be honest about this and talk to people about the barriers that arise for both parties. Above all, a meaningful relationship cannot be dictated by policy or wider institutional aims; that would be more like a contract or even an employment engagement (there is that word again). Abby Satinsky argues that we need to have "one-to-one relationships which transcend what the institution wants," and I think this is the key. It is a scary, but also exciting, place of possibility if we listen and allow relationships to develop organically without the scaffolding we have been conditioned to place on them.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Esther Amis-Hughes is a Community Engagement Manager at Leeds Museums and Galleries. She began her career as a learning officer, and in 2010, she established a youth engagement program at Leeds City Museum as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. This ignited a passion to work with people in Leeds to develop and co-curate their museum. The youth program has won several regional and national awards, and in 2021, Amis-Hughes began managing the service's community program. Amis-Hughes has authored articles and chapters about co-curation and is a passionate advocate for co-developed and compassionate practice.

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