

Rethinking Disability Representation

Life Beyond the Label Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service

Life Beyond the Label was a temporary exhibition held at Colchester Castle from 17th October 2007 to 19th May 2008. The development of the project began in October 2006 with the appointment of a post to research and deliver the exhibition and associated events. The non-cash contribution made to the project by Colchester Museums was 50% of the staff time from the Curator of Community History for one year.

Process

Life Beyond the Label built on the previous research project **Buried in the Footnotes** by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) and the pilot study commissioned by Colchester Museums in 2000, 'Representing the Lives of Disabled People in History' by Dr Jane Pearson.

The **Life Beyond the Label** exhibition aimed to explore current and historical perceptions and attitudes towards disability and increase the visibility of stories about disabled people in an attempt to dispel stereotypical views.

Our aim was to be more representative of disabled people. We also wanted to encourage visitors to realise that we all have many labels – those that we give ourselves and those that we give each other – and to consider these issues with reference to themselves rather than associating disability with 'otherness'. Fear of offending and political correctness have contributed to some people feeling uncomfortable talking about disability. In order to begin breaking down the barriers and stigma attached to the label of disability it was important to frame the narrative of the exhibition in a way which would have universal appeal.

Consultation and Collaboration

Working collaboratively with different people was crucial to the success of the exhibition. The Curator of Community History had little personal experience of disability before beginning the project and felt that some disabled people may question the motives of someone who didn't have an impairment being involved. In reality it was carers and family members rather than disabled people who were initially apprehensive of the project. Working collaboratively with the Access Officer – herself a wheelchair user and so brought her own

perspectives to the project – helped to quickly alleviate any fears and allowed people to relax and open up, overcoming the trust issues.

We had little contact with the other museums working on the wider **Rethinking Disability Representation (RDR)** project. At the residential meeting in February 2008 it was interesting to note that the other museums had been struggling with similar issues, ideas and frustrations. More collaboration and sharing ideas earlier may have helped to move projects on and enabled the different museum partners to provide mutual encouragement and support.

The comments provided from the Think Tank at the initial residential were useful; however, we were uncertain as to the extent of their advisory role it would have been useful to have had more clarity about this.

Throughout the project we had regular consultation with disabled people and organisations in Colchester; this was central to the development of ideas, and provided content, objects and stories. Key to the consultation process was PORTAL, the Museum's disability access advisory group. The group has eight members with a range of impairments. Since being set up in 2000, the group has been integral to the access work of the Museum service. PORTAL were consulted at every stage of the project's development and provided a sounding board to resolve sensitive issues.

One of the most problematic issues was language and word choice. Language is dynamic and constantly changing, and when using language connected to disability we felt it was important not to cause offence and reinforce stereotypes or abusive language, however we wanted to convey the historical use of language with regards to disability. Maintaining the balance between being informative without being prescriptive and thought-provoking without being insulting was a continual challenge. A number of ideas were considered and debated with PORTAL who suggested that recording a similar discussion with a group of disabled people would be an appropriate way to deal with language considerations. PORTAL coordinator Catherine Turner recruited and led a focus group of disabled people who were filmed talking openly about disability language, and terms which they use themselves, and how they feel about words used by other people. This film was both powerful and informative. The use of humour also helped to deflect some of the sensitivities around language without being disparaging.

An important collaboration was with the two artists who worked on the projects which fed into the exhibition. Both artists were disabled and offered unique perspectives and a wealth of experience in the representation of disability and identity. Lynn Weddle worked with ten disabled people on a photography project and provided the idea of the very powerful photo shots, which led to the video diaries. Disabled artist Caroline Cardus was commissioned to create an artwork for the exhibition and during May and June 2007 she spent time working with different disabled groups in Colchester to collect a wealth of material to inspire the final piece of work entitled **The Wheel of Life**.

Collections

The **Life Beyond the Label** exhibition was not about the medical history of disability. In order to challenge the historical preconception of disability as a medical issue rather than a social issue we consciously decided not to have anything about medicine in the exhibition. Where adaptive equipment was displayed the focus was on how it was designed for living, along with the stories of people who used the objects, to give them a strong social context.

Previous research carried out on our existing collections by Dr Jane Pearson had revealed a few 'hidden' connections between objects and disability. Many of the stories connected to these objects were already being told in our permanent displays. For example, the story of the 19th century disabled painter John Vine, or the 1950s doll's pram bought by a father to encourage his daughter to walk again as she recovered from polio. Other objects such as the Electric Convulsive Therapy machine from Severalls Hospital had strong medical connections but no social context and on their own revealed little about the stories of disabled people in Colchester. As a result we decided to proactively seek objects to illustrate the oral histories collected throughout the project.

In February 2007 the Museum made a public appeal for objects and stories connected to disability. The event, called the 'Disability Roadshow', was held at Colchester Library. It gave the public an opportunity to look at some of the objects the Museum had already collected and encouraged people to bring in their own objects, photos and stories connected to disability. The campaign captured the imagination of the press and the extensive amount of publicity which the event generated proved to be a major catalyst for the project. As well as raising awareness of the project, the publicity for the event initiated many new contacts for the Museum. A number of individuals came forward with stories or offered to loan relevant objects and photographs. Unsurprisingly, due to the sensitive topic, many of these contacts were tentative at first. We were contacted by family members and carers rather than disabled people and it took time to build up relationships and trust. However, these one-to-one contacts were invaluable in providing insightful and inspiring objects for the exhibition.

One of the main issues we encountered in collecting objects was that many of the people we interviewed no longer had the object which they talked about. Either the objects had been used until they fell apart, had been passed on to other disabled people who would benefit from them, or they were thrown away because no one felt that they were important.

At the beginning of the collecting process we were offered a great deal of medical equipment and objects more traditionally associated with disability, for example, wheelchairs and artificial limbs. However, many of these items had no social context. As we continued to build up contacts and collect stories we began to receive more unusual and unexpected objects. Dorothy, who is deaf, donated a tube of brightly coloured lipstick. She explained that this helped her daughter, who is visually impaired, to see her facial expressions so

helping them to communicate. Such objects challenged the stereotypical, clinical view of adaptive technology and showed how 'normal', everyday objects can be so versatile.

Design Process

The design of the exhibition emerged from the natural layout of the space available, using the recesses and alcoves to showcase the various objects and projects which formed the exhibition. The desire to be as accessible as possible inspired this creative process and we experimented with textures and display methods which could enhance the sensory experience for all visitors.

Many objects were put on open display, for example the old, heavy 1960s wheelchair was displayed beside the lightweight sports wheelchair which enabled people to touch and experience the difference in texture, weight and size. Open displays helped physical accessibility and also aimed to demystify objects, dissociating them from a medical, clinical context and historical prejudices. An example of this is the door taken from a padded side room in Severalls Hospital. Displaying this object openly helped to convey difficult and emotive issues around mental health. Allowing visitors to touch the door made the object and issues more tangible and the stories connected to them more personable with a strong human resonance.

As part of the exhibition we built a sensory learning zone where people of all ages could enjoy tactile and sensory games and toys relating to disability. Every aspect of this area was designed to stimulate the senses; the walls were lined in colourful, soft spongy foam, the chairs were covered in faux fur and items on display included BSL interactive material, modified skittles, books and even a Paralympic Barbie.

The experimental approach taken in the overall design process was emphasised further by the use of technology, used extensively throughout the exhibition to make the displays more accessible and inclusive. A purpose-built cinema space within the exhibition incorporated a loop system and an audio-described version of the film on a personal DVD player. All the films used in the exhibition contained both subtitles and BSL interpretation. The oral history recordings were available in audio, written transcript and Braille. Tactile representations of images and photographs were displayed along with audio descriptions in order to make the images more accessible to people with a visual impairment.

Personal CD players were used to provide an audio guide of the exhibition text along with audio descriptions. This was available from Gallery Assistants on request and was inexpensive and effective. However, it relied on people asking for the audio guide and there was poor take-up. Other ideas on how to distribute audio guides will be considered for the future.

The exhibition was designed to provide opportunities to stimulate debate and enable a two-way dialogue with the public. We experimented with different

approaches to encourage visitors to leave comments. Consultation had shown that many deaf people prefer to sign rather than use the written word so visitors were encouraged to record or sign their comments and views in a 'vox box' video booth. As well as the more traditional response cards we also had a blackboard comment wall and a web blog on our [Life Beyond the Label](#) microsite. More technology was used in this exhibition than in previous exhibitions at Colchester and Ipswich Museums and although there were some inevitable maintenance issues, the use of technology for accessibility proved to be very successful and has accelerated plans to incorporate similar ideas into future permanent and temporary displays.

The 'Who Am I?' photographs with descriptive adjectives originated from an idea to publicise the project. Five disabled people chose a series of words to identify themselves. The words were drawn on their faces to show that everyone has many layers and facets to their personalities and although some people may have an impairment they aren't defined by it.

Displayed beside each of the images was a short biography written by the person and a photograph showing them doing things that they enjoy in everyday life. The aim was for visitors to recognise that these were real stories rather than an art installation. We hoped that the idea of using labels would have universal appeal and visitors would be able to relate to the idea of being 'labelled' even if they had little experience of disability. To further emphasis this idea we created an interactive area to encourage visitors to think about their own labels. Using a mirror visitors were invited to write words to describe themselves on the image of their face.

The photography project was one of the most successful elements of the overall project and was displayed at the heart of the exhibition in a purpose-built cinema space. Photographer Lynn Weddle and sound-artist Simon Keep worked with ten people for twelve weeks to help them create their own personal multimedia stories. The participants were aged from seven to sixty-six and had a range of impairments. Each person was encouraged to take their own approach and to think about the different ways they see themselves, how they feel others see them and how they would like to be seen. There were weekly one-to-one workshops and four group workshops where everyone met to share their ideas, their inspirations and motivations. Many of the participants commented on how fortunate they felt to have had the opportunity to tell their stories and learn new skills, and the technical side of photography. Two participants enjoyed the project so much that they bought digital cameras to continue photography when the project finished. To celebrate the completion of the photography project we held an event in August at Colchester Castle Museum. There was a party and private screening of the films attended by the participants, their families and friends. The first person approach – people tell their own story in their own way – proved to be a poignant and powerful way of getting visitors to engage with difficult issues. We were aware that some visitors would instinctively avoid discussions around disability which they might perceive to be difficult or gloomy. However, the personal video stories engaged visitors, helping to

break down stigmas and make the issues more approachable and understandable.

Issues Learnt from the Project

Although Colchester Museum already had a good reputation for disability access and representation, this exhibition proved to be a steep learning curve as there was no frame of reference to work from or even to give guidelines. The design and process both needed to be considered differently.

It was necessary to think on multiple levels to assess whether the display was patronising, or informative and accessible. The potential attitude of visitors was daunting, as were the expectations of the disabled communities. The exhibition could not be sentimental or present disabled people as victims but at the same time it had to avoid the stereotypes of 'heroic people', 'overcoming' their disability to lead a 'normal' life. There had to be broad representation of diverse disabilities. The exhibition had to be accessible to the widest number of people with different impairments. The use of technology and experimentation with different techniques was vital to overcome these obstacles but also presented the possibility of maintenance issues.

Although it was necessary to make the exhibition as positive as possible there was a danger of not showing the difficulties as well, it was a constant balancing act.

The deaf community do not see themselves as disabled, they have their own language and culture, and communication can be challenging. The decision was taken to represent them – however, it was difficult to find an appropriate form of representation. The relationships needed to build trust in this area were not there and more time was needed to create these links.

Legacy

It was hoped that the exhibition would provide a benchmark for what can be achieved, not only in creating an inclusive exhibition with a range of levels of accessibility, but also with regard to the process of representation of disability in future exhibitions.

It is anticipated that new projects will emerge from some of the issues raised around disability representation in this exhibition. The Museum service is keen to continue its work in this area and elements of the exhibition will enable further projects to be carried out.

It is hoped that the general public who saw the exhibition will go away with new understanding of the everyday lives of disabled people, discuss what they have seen and absorb it into their consciousness.