

Rethinking Disability Representation

One in Four: Exploring experiences and attitudes surrounding disability Tyne and Wear Museums

One in Four was a touring temporary exhibition, which visited the Discovery Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne from 25th September – 18th November 2007, and South Shields Museum and Art Gallery from 15th December 2007 – 1st March 2008. School sessions were run at both sites concurrently.

Consultation

Tyne and Wear Museums (TWM) formed a consultation group made up of eight local disabled people. The consultation group met to discuss the key message of the exhibition, its themes and content.

Collaboration

TWM collaborated with the Art Room from St Nicholas Hospital, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne. A group of mental health service users from the Art Room were given the exhibition brief and a budget from which to create art work to accompany the exhibition. The group created four responses to the brief which were included in the exhibition.

The Art Room also ran a drop-in art session supporting the exhibition marking World Mental Health Day (October 2007).

Collections

TWM used material from their social history, science and industry and maritime collections dating from the 1800s to the present day.

The opportunity was also taken to do some contemporary collecting to build on existing collections relating to disability. For example, TWM collected sporting equipment from local Paralympian, Jim Richardson, who competed for Team GB during the 1990s. TWM also filmed and recorded, for the first time, the life-stories of deaf BSL users of the exhibition.

Exhibits were also borrowed from Tyne and Wear Archives and Beamish Open Air Museum.

It was interesting to note that many of TWM's collections fitted the medical model rather than the social model of disability. Few came with much information about their previous owner. Although this decreased the number of items that might have been used in the exhibition it made it easier to pick the strongest material; objects which related to particular and individual stories.

Timescale

Rethinking Disability Representation (RDR) project start – June 2006

Research period – July/August 2006

Consultation open day – 7th September 2006

Work with consultation group – October and November 2006

Collecting new material – May 2007

3D design – July 2007

Text writing – September 2007

Process

TWM started work on the RDR project by holding an open day / workshop for local disabled people. Invitations were sent out to people already on existing museum contact lists. The workshop focused on two aims:

To find people who would form a consultation group that could consider issues to do with representation (rather than access)

To find out if there was consensus on issues around disability.

A group of eight people was formed as a result of the open day. We aimed to involve people who understood issues of representation, represented a mix of people (age, occupation, disability and gender) and to ensure that the group could work together to openly discuss these issues without causing offence to other people in the group.

Members of the deaf community attended the open day but did not wish to be involved in the consultation group as they considered themselves not to be disabled. This response made it difficult for Museum staff since it had been decided to include deaf people's stories in the exhibition.

The consultation group met five times to discuss the project before the residential in January 2007.

In those meetings numerous challenging issues arose. The breadth of issues and topics the group wanted to cover was enormous, and it was difficult to find ways of illustrating the issues with the collection.

At the residential the Think Tank suggested that too much consultation had been carried out and that the project development team needed to take an editorial standpoint and refine the key message and themes.

With hindsight perhaps an introductory session on museum collection and curatorial issues would have helped to manage expectations. It would have also helped to have established roles and responsibilities at the start of the project to clarify the input of the group, the relationship to the Think Tank and the working parameters of the team.

After the consultation group stopped meeting, challenges centred on deciding on the key message, writing text that illustrated the key message and ensuring that the diversity of the experiences of disabled people were represented. Especially challenging was representing the opinions of one person from within the deaf community which were considered by staff to be offensive to other disabled people.

The text went through nine versions!

The final challenge was working with the Think Tank. Input from the two Think Tank sessions, at the beginning of the project and at the end, represented a challenge in managing timetables and responding to feedback. The use of different terminology, too, presented some difficulties. TWM had chosen to use the term 'disabled person' while the Think Tank advocated using the phrase 'people with impairments'.

Designing an exhibition about disability that appealed to a wider non-disabled audience was also a challenge for the exhibition team. From the title of the exhibition, to the text and 3D design the exhibition team tried to make the exhibition as accessible as possible for all.

Getting schools to sign up for the accompanying sessions was difficult and involved a rebranding and reworking of the workshop available so that it incorporated free craft activities.

Legacy

The exhibition helped us to think about the strengths of our collection related to disability. All of the text used in the labelling for the exhibition has now been added to the Modes records.

This increase in knowledge and the thought that went into the use of language and the interpretation of history will assist when considering the proposed re-display of the Newcastle Story permanent galleries in the Discovery Museum.

The exhibition highlighted gaps in the collection and has led to further projects such as 'Mind the Gap', an exhibition about mental health within the region, inspired by [One in Four](#).

The exhibition raised awareness of the importance of highlighting the role of disabled people in our history. Recently, the Keeper of Maritime History included a section about disabled rowers in an exhibition on the history of rowing on the River Tyne.