‘More than gaining a mark’: Students as partners and co-producers in public history and community engagement

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P ARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC and community-based history projects offers many benefits for undergraduate history students. These range from experience of the workplace and the honing of 'transferable skills', through the development of confidence and a stronger sense of identity, to a sharper and more sophisticated understanding of the characteristics of both public and academic history. Most fundamentally, as McCulloch has argued, involvement in the co-production of historical research can counteract the more negative aspects of the 'consumer model' of higher education (McCullogh, 2009). This article explores pedagogical issues concerning the place of public and community history within the undergraduate history curriculum. It draws upon my experience of teaching community and public history modules for the past decade at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in the UK. The first part of the article outlines the range of opportunities offered by public history/employability modules as identified by students. Part Two discusses the integration into modules of a community history website and digital archive, developed in collaboration with public historians in the South Yorkshire region. It explores the capacity of such a website to enable student involvement as partners and co-producers (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014), drawing on their passions, enthusiasms and expertise to shape (and reshape) the module each academic year. It is my argument that public and community-based history projects move beyond the narrow focus of the employability agenda on 'work-related learning' and 'transferable
The value of public history

I have designed and delivered a range of community history and public history modules at Sheffield Hallam University. These have combined a taught component – lectures, seminars and workshops on aspects of public history and community heritage – with an external project. Community History, a twelve-week Level 6 (3rd Year) module which first ran in 2002–2003, involved students being ‘attached’ to community-based history projects in Sheffield and the wider South Yorkshire region. Their brief – which was negotiated between all parties – was to produce an output ‘of use’ to that project. Students could choose to work individually or as part of a pair or small group, as long as their contribution could be identified (and assessed) as a discreet component of the project. Typically, they undertook small pieces of research or oral history interviews. This module was developed with the support of HEA (Higher Education Academy) History Subject Centre Teaching Development Grants, which enabled me to research the exponential growth of community history projects in the region in the years surrounding the Millennium. This development was due in large part to the emergence of two funding streams: the Heritage Lottery Fund and European bodies which were financing regeneration initiatives, in which community-based history was identified as a useful ‘capacity building’ tool. A second grant enabled me to work out a relationship between such projects and my students.

While I was initially inspired to develop Community History through a straightforward desire to make connections between the university and the wider public, it soon became clear that this form of ‘work-related learning’ presented considerable potential in terms of the development of specific skills and a general ‘capability set’ valued by employers (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). With the arrival of the ‘e4e’ (education for employability) agenda, the community history model became central to the ‘employability’ strategy of the History group at

 skills’ and are conducive to a rich engagement with history, both as an academic discipline and in wider practice (Knupfer, 2013).
SHU. Thus, Community History was imported to Level 5 (2nd year), where it was developed in the shape of a year-long module which combines experience of working on an external project with a careers management component involving external speakers from public history fields and taught sessions on presentations, CV writing, personal statements, career action planning etc. Finally, in 2013–2014, I used the same model to develop Northern Soul: regional identities in the North of England, 1800–2000. Here, the public history component is a central part of a twelve-week level 6 module which focuses on the history of the north of England and enables critical exploration of the significance of community heritage to social and economic regeneration in the region.

All of these modules are part of a history programme at SHU which focuses on British, European and global history in the making of the modern world since the late eighteenth century. Apart from Applied History and the final-year dissertation, all modules run for one semester (12 weeks). There is also a core of research skills modules, running through all three years of the degree programme. Students are assessed by a varied diet, which is the equivalent of 2000-word essays and a 2-hour, 2-question exam at Levels 4 and 5 and 3000-word essays and a 3-hour 3-question exam at Level 6, but which also includes analyses of primary sources, presentations, posters etc. The community history modules are generally assessed by reports, presentations and a portfolio of project work.

In extensive end-of-module surveys conducted over the past few years, students have identified a range of benefits involved in undertaking public history projects. As might be expected, they frequently emphasise the value of such modules in terms of employability. This involves the development of skills and (for some) an opening up of whole new fields of career possibilities. Students often do not know that the skills they gain as part of their history degrees are valued by employers in a range of fields. In the words of one student:

Historical research requires you to absorb a large volume of material and then think critically about the information presented. Through completing the project on the community history module it made me
realise that these skills are valuable assets to have in the work place (3rd year student).

Many students assume they will become secondary school history teachers because they have been told that teaching is what history graduates do. Lectures by external speakers in history-related careers (archival work, museums, journalism, for example) and careers management sessions run by the careers service which emphasise the relevance of the historian’s skills to work in the Civil Service, local government, marketing and more, all serve to broaden students’ conceptions of possible future careers.

Perhaps a more surprising but nonetheless pleasing outcome of the surveys concerns the emphasis placed by students on the role of public history modules in giving them a greater appreciation of what it means to work as a historian. As the following quotations suggest, students have frequently reported feeling that they are better historians at the end of their public history projects:

This module has allowed me to experience some of the processes used in order to be an effective historian trying to source information for yourself. It has put into practice many of the skills that I have used when researching essays, but has furthered these with me having to consider their usefulness and trying to create a more complete picture, rather than trying to answer a rather closed question (3rd year student).

Producing some work which will be used for a historical purpose has made me feel that I am now a true historian. Instead of researching for an essay, I have worked on a project which will help other people’s research. This has made me a more effective historian (3rd year student).

This can be understood in terms discussed by Lendol Calder in his critique of the excessive focus placed by history lecturers on covering great swathes of history – the content – at the expense of process. Calder argues that a focus on ‘uncoverage’ – spending more time on fewer topics, exploring primary and secondary sources, asking questions about the creation of historical arguments – allows us to expose those critical elements of our practice that are traditionally hidden away: the process of inquiry, the difficulties and dead-ends,
the issues of interpretation and the instability of historical narrative (Calder, 2006). Public history projects offer another way of approaching the issue of ‘uncoverage’, enabling students to see principles of historical research in ways sometimes obscured by standard content-led modules.

Scholarship on ‘crossing’ between educational worlds can throw further light on the capacity of movement between academic and public history to enable students to develop a clearer conception of the practices of both disciplinary fields and so create new identities as historians. Explorations of public history as a different genre from academic history can enable reflection upon the academic method, clarifying the processes by which history is created. Thus, as is suggested by the following quotations, the value of the public history project can be seen not just in terms of placements and employability, but in enabling reflection on the discipline of history itself:

I think that the whole module has provided insight into the way that history works, not just in terms of standard essay writing but in regard to how you shape a piece of history that will do more than gain a mark. (3rd year student).

This has shown to me that the skills that I have been developing can be applied to real settings ... it makes them feel more worthwhile. (2nd year student).

The module has given me a better understanding of the purpose of history. In traditional modules we’re taught the necessary skills but never given a sense of why it’s important historians do certain things. (3rd year student).

The focus here is on history with a purpose; a project that does more than contribute to a final grade. Indeed, one outcome I did not anticipate was that students would value aspects of their community history projects more than their academic work and would use the former to critique the absence of ‘real-world impact’ in the latter. This has required careful management; doubting the value of academic history is not the best place to be in the final year of a
degree programme! Thus, I now place great emphasis in both modules on the idea of history being conducted in different genres and the relevance for them all of the skills of the academic historian.

A number of comments address very directly the value that students place on the significance of history in the contemporary world:

It’s made history seem more real to me, not just things written in a book. (3rd year student).

My overall feeling about this work was that it was beneficial to me in terms of good marks and experience but more importantly I felt I was contributing to something else, something bigger than my degree. It was an experience and opportunity to contribute to something, which felt good. Traditional essays and exams don’t allow us to create something unique which has a purpose. This module did and therefore the work, to me, feels like an invaluable experience. (2nd year student).

I found through this module that community history is more than just a study of local history. It is a method of bringing together and celebrating a community which academic history does not do. Through this experience I think academic history can be static and its purpose is not always obvious. (2nd year student).

The desire to ‘celebrate’ a community might ring alarm bells for some academic historians. On the one hand, it recalls long-standing academic criticism of ‘local history’ that focuses on uncritical storytelling and an absence of contextualisation within the national or global picture (Beckett, 2007: 192–93, 196–97). Indeed, Jo Guldi and David Armitage have recently identified as problematic the absence of the long durée in much historical research (Guldi & Armitage, 2014). In addition, as was raised by colleagues at the international teaching and learning conference in Linköping in May 2014, it is possible that such a focus on the local community could be productive of a narrow regionalism which, in some national contexts, could be dangerous. As so many of our students at SHU are from South Yorkshire and neighbouring regions, this is a potential problem. However, placing local history projects within a framework
which highlights questions of the relationship between local, national and global histories can enable an exploration of ‘emotional bottlenecks’ fuelled by media messages about the distinction between Britain and the world, thus enabling the development of a critical citizenship in which students better understand the power of local and regional attachments (Middendorf et al., 2014).

As Peter Knupfer has argued, such work is predicated on a different set of priorities from those of academic history. Rather than focusing on filling a gap in the scholarship, community-based history asks how history serves the public and how historians communicate with a range of audiences (Knupfer, 2013: 1164). Moreover, recent work on the meaning and value of museums and heritage sites has emphasised the capacity of public history to foster an ‘emotional link’ with the past. As Lucy Taksa has argued in her work on Eveleigh Railway Works near Sydney, Australia and the STEAM Museum in Swindon, UK, when focused on social history, heritage can provide ‘meaning, purpose and value’ (Taksa, 2003: 394). As Laurajane Smith has also claimed, this sense of ‘intangible heritage’ can be especially poignant in the context of museums in post-industrial communities which encourage visitors to reflect on their past work identities and rich community life (Smith, 2006). As suggested above, students engaged in public history projects often report feeling a similar emotional link which, they state, can be absent from mainstream modules. Words such as ‘pleasure’, ‘passion’ and ‘pride’ feature heavily in their feedback:

I was particularly motivated by the fact that the module allowed us, as historians, to be responsible for a project that had an influence on the wider community. The constant reminder of this as the final outcome of the module sustained my motivation and I then produced a project as my final piece of coursework which I was extremely proud of. (3rd year student).

This module required a lot more attentiveness and commitment than more traditional ones because we had to keep on top of the project and constantly make it into something new in order to find all of the information that we required. This gave us much more involvement
with the material rather than just being given a basic reading list because we were having to consider all different angles [...] This has made me feel extremely proud of this project because I feel between the three of us we have successfully met and exceeded the criteria. (3rd year student).

The transcription was long and arduous and extremely time consuming, but once done there was a sense of achievement which has been unique amongst my modules this semester. I think this project has definitely been the highlight of my module choices... Despite the work load being high, and without sounding melodramatic, I think [we] will have gained more than just points and grades from this module. Although it has been hard, it has also been a lot of fun and I would definitely consider helping on another community research project in the future. (3rd year student).

This raises interesting questions about the potential of public history to harness emotional engagement and, indeed, the place of emotion and the self in the learning process (see Booth and Booth, 2011). It suggests that moving beyond a narrow focus on employability 'skills' towards more fundamental issues concerning confidence, self-efficacy and belonging through partnership work may have particular significance for first-generation university students from the local area (Thomas, 2002).

Interestingly, as suggested in some of the quotations above, a number of students explicitly related feelings of pleasure and satisfaction to their sense of ownership and control:

In the other modules I completed at university I always felt the lecturer was in control and any trouble I may be having was easy to resolve with the lecturer. I have been committed to each module I have completed at university, but I was more committed to Community History because it was my own independent project which I was responsible for… I felt free to make the decisions throughout the project and enjoyed the more independent approach to study. I was also more relaxed within the group and enjoyed class discussions more as I did not feel intimidated by anyone and that all the people in the class felt a passion for creating history rather than writing about other historians’ opinions. (3rd year student).
Because it takes a different approach it is at first daunting because it is so different from how we are usually taught and assessed. However, I think because we take control of the project it feels like we have been involved in creating the project. In turn this helps us evaluate what we could have done differently after and to be responsible for how well it goes. I think the teaching at the beginning of the module is good because it prepares us for the module but the choice we get of projects and the way we conduct much of the research was enjoyable and exciting. (3rd year student).

As Alan Booth has argued, while achieving a balance between structure and freedom, independence and interdependence can be challenging, a degree of choice and participation is essential for the development of a positive context for learning (Booth, 2003: 67–86). In the words of one student who has since gone on to study for a PhD which focuses on oral history, working on a community history project ‘allowed me to find my own voice on public history matters’ (3rd Year student).

Students as partners

Of course, involvement in public and community history projects does not automatically mean partnership and co-production. In the first instance, the range of available projects in any given year is dependent to a large extent upon existing relationships with projects; those with whom we have had a good relationship in the past, or new ones I have approached or who have made contact. Thus, there is a tension between wanting the students to have choice and ownership of their studies while needing to keep the module manageable. This
year has seen the launch of a community history website, South Yorkshire Through Time (www.southyorkshirethroughtime.org.uk), which is a collaboration between myself and public historians in the region. The purposes of the website are manifold. For SHU, it provides a context for public engagement and editorial and other project management opportunities for history students. This is one way of dealing with the issue of choice: students can undertake a project of their choosing, but it is within the confines of the website and is therefore more manageable for me as module tutor. Furthermore, students can choose their own level of engagement. They can contribute to a pre-defined project, for example, or they can join an editorial team and engage in decision-making about the focus and future direction of the website.

Recent research into student learning has reinforced the argument that students who are co-producers in projects are more likely to experience a sense of involvement with their studies. They are more likely to be active and deep learners who place emphasis on the process as well as the final product, and to report enjoyment of feeling part of a community rather than feeling isolated as an individual learner (McCulloch, 2009: 177). As Healey et al. have
argued, co-production offers a range of benefits, including a sense of empowerment, an enthusiasm for enhancement activities, a greater confidence and a stronger sense of identity. They write that:

partnership represents a sophisticated and effective approach to student engagement because it offers the potential for a more authentic engagement with the nature of learning itself and the possibility for genuinely transformative learning experiences for all involved.

Co-production can develop a sense of shared enterprise and ultimately, a ‘partnership learning community’ (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014: 19–20, 8) which has the potential for enhancing students’ understanding of citizenship in the world beyond the university.

The issue remains, however, of how to move from a position of students as participants in community-based history projects to students as partners in the co-production of public history. The question of how to embed the website within my two public history modules, Applied History (Level 5) and Northern Soul (Level 6), was the focus of a Higher Education Academy-funded project in 2013–2014. I gathered student responses by adapting my original end-of-module questionnaire to include questions on the co-production of research. My main interest was in what it would feel like for students to be partners in the continued development of the website: What would they be doing? How would it be different from their usual academic work? The questionnaires were then followed up with focus group discussions.

Students taking my final year module, Northern Soul, were enthusiastic about the website. They were very interested in the employability dimension of the module, as suggested by the following comments:

It is a good way to get experience and to showcase your skills when you are going for jobs.

I feel like I am happy to have all the help I can get when it comes to my employability!
They liked having South Yorkshire Through Time as a focus and found this preferable to the requirement to produce a free-standing public history project, which they saw as interesting but potentially rather vague:

It gives the project a bit more purpose.

It feels a bit more focused. Otherwise I am producing it essentially for myself. Then I can use it in interviews etc.

They particularly liked the idea of South Yorkshire Through Time operating as the fall-back option:

I like the idea of setting up South Yorkshire Through Time as the default option, but students can still be free to choose projects that focus on public history outside of South Yorkshire.

While project work received the thumbs up, however, Level 6 students emphatically did not want more choice. Instead, they wanted me, as module leader, to specify a range of possible projects from which they could choose. The reasons for this concerned the timing of the module in the second semester of their final year. They were feeling the pressure, not least of dissertation work. They did not want another substantial piece of work where every aspect of it was their responsibility, nor where group work was compulsory. Thus, contrary to my expectations, Level 6 Northern Soul students were keen to participate in South Yorkshire Through Time but did not want to be full partners in the project.

Like the Level 6 students, Level 5 Applied History students valued the employability dimension:

It sets you apart from other people if you’ve been involved in another project.

It shows that you have got involved and can produce individual work.

This is actually something you can talk about in a real-world context.

They also liked the purposefulness of the project:
Your history research is actually being used. You’re not just doing it for the sake of it, and it makes you want to work more because it has purpose and is more real than anything you have done.

They liked the idea of a list of suggested topics, with the proviso that students could shape a proposal on a different topic if they so wished. But they were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about partnership. Students suggested the possibility of forming an editorial team and taking responsibility for planning activities for the coming year. The idea of running a day conference on a topical theme – World War One and commemoration, for example – held great appeal.

I want to go into marketing probably so it’d be nice to have more input in that, but at the same time do the history side of it. If we are talking about something which is good for the CV, then I’d be able to say I was there at the meeting where this was designed...

Others suggested using social media such as Twitter and Instagram to publicise the website and specific events. They also liked the idea of writing for the website and working with community history groups:

We can do design, or writing, or management or all of them and history can link all of those.

The flexibility of the website in terms of generating bespoke projects which meet students’ own interests was therefore very appealing to Level 5 students.

Conclusion

It is important to heed feedback that demonstrates that not all students wish to be partners in community-based history projects; that at certain times in their academic careers, this requirement could produce more stresses and pressures. However, students nonetheless see involvement in public and community-based history projects as extremely beneficial. Benefits range from the straightforward development of employability ‘skills’ and the experience of work-
related learning, to more fundamental issues of identity, confidence and engagement with the discipline. I am struck particularly by the repetition in student feedback of the phrase ‘more than’. Involvement in community history projects enables the development of a more complex understanding of history, ‘more than what we did in the first and second years’. At the same time, such projects are ‘more than just a study of local history’, but show the significance of history to communities. Ultimately, involvement in community history projects can involve an emotional and intellectual engagement that provides ‘more than just points and grades’. This research suggests that public and community-based history can offer a valuable way of moving towards a more holistic conception of history education.

1 I emphasise ‘attachment’ rather than ‘placement’ because the latter is suggestive of regular attendance at an external place of work and supervision by an external partner. As different projects provide different levels of input, it is important to manage students’ (and projects’) expectations. All remain under my supervision.

2 See for example, Helen Dobson (2007), ‘Women of Kiveton Park’, http://www.kivetonwaleshistory.co.uk/heritage/women-of-kiveton-park

3 As Mike Winstanley’s essay suggests, community history projects were not available in the mid-1990s. For his innovative work placement modules at the University of Lancaster, see Winstanley (1996).


5 The concept of ‘figured worlds’, introduced by Holland et al. (1998), is adapted in a useful way by Urrieta Jr. (2007) and Cecil Robinson (2007).

6 This has been confirmed by work at SHU on well-being (Alison Twells, Penny Furness, Sadiq Bhanbhro, Christopher Dayson and Maxine Gregory, ‘Community-based history and well-being’, forthcoming).

7 For some similar points about emotional engagement and the value of history in the context of student field trips, see Ludvigsson (2012). See also discussion of the value of engagement with history in emotional as well as intellectual terms in Booth and Booth (2011).
References


Booth, Alan (ed.) (2010) *What Do We Want Our Students to Be?*, Nottingham: Centre for Integrative Learning.


