October 2020

Student Curator Project at the University of Surrey: Encouraging and Embracing Inclusivity and Diversity Through a Staff-Student Partnership

Catherine Stephen
University of Surrey

Catherine Batson
University of Surrey

Sarah Surget
University of Surrey

Joel Weller
University of Surrey

STUDENT CURATOR PROJECT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SURREY: ENCOURAGING AND EMBRACING INCLUSIVITY AND DIVERSITY THROUGH A STAFF-STUDENT PARTNERSHIP

Catherine Stephen, Head of Engagement and Enhancement, University of Surrey

Catherine Batson, Faculty Engagement Manager, University of Surrey

Sarah Surget, VP Support (Students' Union), BSc Criminology, University of Surrey

Joel Weller, BA English Literature with Creative Writing, University of Surrey

Background and Aims

In 2018 Library and Learning Services at the University of Surrey launched a collaborative staff-student partnership project based around the collections and resources in the Library. The aim was to celebrate and further expand the diversity of Library collections. With the increasing awareness of the inherent inequalities and bias in the education system, as highlighted by the national 'Liberate My Curriculum' campaigns in the UK Higher Education sector, the Library Engagement team have been working alongside the Students' Union (SU) at Surrey to address these issues. The project aims to promote, encourage, and celebrate the diversity of our student population and that of the Library's collections, whilst at the same time empowering students financially, creatively, and intellectually, and developing real-world skills such as project, budgetary, and team management.

The idea developed as a result of discussions between the SU President and the Library about how the University could support the *Decolonising the Curriculum* movement. Key to the Library values, it was important to achieve authentic student engagement and ensure the project was inclusive. We decided that a fully delivered staff-student partnership project would have the impact desired.

Therefore, in October 2018, the Vice President (VP) Student Support and VP Student Voice of the SU nominated students to lead themed installations, or 'curations.' Since then the Student Curator project has delivered eight successful curations at time of writing, working with individual and small groups of students. The first Student Curator was Joel Weller, who curated a display on Black History Month. Other themes have included LGBT History, Invisible Disabilities, Healthy Learning, Empowering International Women, and Talking about Mental Health.

The Curators worked alongside a small project team of Library staff who supported them in identifying and gathering physical and virtual displays in the library of books, digital resources and materials from our Archives. Library staff and students have explored different learning tools such as the online reading list system to promote their finds. They have organised interactive display elements such as reaction boards, utilised Library social media accounts to run Instagram stories and pose questions, created study playlists, collaboratively written haiku and provided inspirational 'lucky dips.' As part of the project, Curators are also encouraged to manage a budget to purchase new book titles for library stock to enhance and develop their themes representation in the library collection.

1

The importance of the Student Curator project and its ability to celebrate diversity was highlighted by Joel in one of his first blog posts on his curation:

> While I enjoy looking back at the feeling of finishing my first year, settling into it was challenging. Especially as the only black/minority boy in my course's year, I felt like everyone at Surrey had already identified people like themselves. One way I would encourage myself was to conduct further research into various black historical icons, and how they have persevered in their fields (i.e. literature) despite their tribulations. Feeling singled out isn't an issue for me – knowing myself for myself means that I can provide a different perspective… (Weller, 2018)

After running for two years, the project has become a core part of the Library Engagement team's work. At the beginning of the academic year, the Library team and the SU meet to decide a plan for the year, including the number of projects to hold and the themes of the curations. The SU then nominates a student to lead the project. Project meetings are held between the Library staff and the Student Curator to plan out ideas, resources, timings, and budget.

The Library team look after the practical elements of the project, such as booking AV screens, helping with uploading materials onto social media accounts, and developing the students' knowledge of the existing library resources and collections, but it is the Student Curator who develops the themes, picks the books for the display, creates the AV slideshows, writes the blogs, and designs the interactive elements, plus they collate recommendations and organise the spending on the new books for the collection.

Benefits of the Project for Staff and Students

The project has had benefits for all involved at a personal, professional, and organisational level. In many ways, by disrupting 'business as usual' through working and interpreting universal themes in different ways, the project encouraged those involved to reflect on how change can be made in different areas and on different levels.

At an institutional level, the displays have connected and deepened links between the Library, student community, and parts of the University community that are not always in close contact. By engaging with issues of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, the project has become part of a wider transformational dialogue. In addition, the Library is building and developing collections that have relevance to all, with the potential to reach wider audiences and have impact beyond the Library walls.

At a professional level, working in this way has stretched the Library Engagement team in new ways. From the start, the project sought to build upon a shared set of values and aims that embody the idea of partnership. The Engagement team are used to being responsible for the delivery of projects. However, this project sees the staff as facilitators and enablers. Individual Student Curators are the project leads, developing their vision and plan and taking the role of experts. The equalising of power relations is a key aspect of the partnership model, but it also allows Library staff members to acquire new skills, such as facilitating, coaching, and supporting in the delivery of timescales and outputs.

Exploring the ideas of co-delivery has led to higher levels of student engagement as students lead from the very beginning and have an emotional and intellectual ownership of their

2

project. Sarah reflects that an important element to her is that if a project comes from a student it will really reach students.

The benefits for the students involved in the project have, naturally, varied with each Student Curator. Our student authors, Joel and Sarah, note, however, that their experiences are likely shared by others taking part. The range of practical skills they developed was wide; Student Curators used a range of techniques, including poster creation and thinking about presenting information, as well as developing key graduate attributes, such as project planning, time management, and liaising. Sarah notes that these skills were an asset in her succeeding in her SU sabbatical role. Having learnt how to communicate with members of staff prior to starting the role ensured that she was more confident and at ease. Being able to work effectively with members of staff on the Student Curation provided the reassurance that these skills could be carried into other projects in the University.

The students who took part in the project highlighted how empowering it was. Joel appreciated and enjoyed the opportunity to include voices and topics that he had not seen in his classes and saw the immediate effect of his suggestions, with new titles being used in other projects and dissertations. Sarah notes that Student Curators are gifted a sense of creative freedom—the ability to apply their own vision to the topic and to reflect on their display and their contribution—but also be receptive and to seek feedback from the wider student community. This allows Curators to revisit and evolve the Curation over the period it is available. An enormous benefit has been to see the awakening of the students' confidence and the realisation that the development of knowledge is not just one-way.

A key takeaway for all involved is the confidence to put forward different ideas and engage in conversations and, for both Joel and Sarah, a sense of pride in what has been created. Joel notes that an especially good aspect of the project was to see passers-by stop and admire the display, regardless of their background. It was good to see people admire different aspects and perspectives that contribute to contemporary British and worldwide cultures, as the goal was to uplift and incite curiosity. Furthermore, for the Student Curators to be seen as experts ensured a feeling of respect from staff and students, who recognised their intellectual work in curating the display and in building collections.

Challenges of Using a Partnership Model to Deliver a Final Project

The experiences of working on this project have led to many benefits. However, as with any new way of working and with many partnership projects, there have been challenges to address and work through.

The Library Engagement team was committed to the programme from the start. However, ensuring that this is seen as a priority at a more strategic level in the Library is an issue that is under discussion. The practical constraints of prioritising time to ensure that each Curation is effectively supported and facilitated alongside the other day-to-day commitments was challenging for the Library team. It is a testament to the enthusiasm of working in partnership with the students that the Engagement team have wanted to be fully involved despite the additional work load it entails. We have managed the tensions that have arisen by sharing workload across the team.

An unexpected but obvious challenge in hindsight has been the balancing of workload for the students. The Library team have tried to be as transparent as possible over the workload involved for the student lead and have tried to be as mindful as possible not to overload students at crucial times in their studies. Some students have reacted better than others to the time management issues involved, but on the whole the motivation of the students is a testament to the partnership model and the dedication and passion the students have for their themes and how much the theme has a personal impact on them. This was not just a challenge noted by staff; students also shared these concerns. Sarah shares that time management was an issue to overcome. As a final year criminology student doing a dissertation and being a part-time SU officer, she was apprehensive of the time commitment this project was going to take and the potential impact on her course. However, Sarah also identified the opportunities of the project. It is important to note, however, that these concerns have formed part of the planning of future Student Curator projects.

A noticeable challenge for the Library team has been the need to continually adapt working approaches as the project team naturally comprises different students and different personalities. Some Student Curators have a very strong idea of the final product, whereas others look to Library staff for ideas and suggestions. Some students are very focused, and others take longer to develop the confidence to be the project lead. The partnership model involves mutual growth and mutual learning.

Another challenge we encountered was that, although the Library Engagement team endeavoured to provide as far as possible an inclusive partnership model, there is still the element of duty of care and assurance that everyone is adhering to University policy, such as the social media policies, during a suggested student social media take-over. At this point the Library staff have had to lead in a constructive manner to ensure everyone is compliant.

The project team had, and continue to have, extensive conversations around the ethical tensions of the Student Curator projects: whether Library staff empower the Curators enough, whether there is enough transparency regarding who gets offered the opportunity to participate, how the themes are chosen, and whether there are members of the University who are being excluded from participating or identifying themes. Furthermore, how do we ensure the overall project is truly inclusive and diverse, and that the themes are not merely tokenistic but provoke genuine dialogue? Library staff also wrestle with the tensions around what we would do if students were too radical or controversial (in our opinion) in their theme choice; do we have the right or the power to decline ideas for themes or participants? We have not come up with the firm answers yet, but the processes and projects require that we constantly reflect on the power gaps, on the credibility of the project, on respect and inclusivity, and on our own professional and personal identities.

Student Curators also report challenges such as selecting material and ensuring that it is appropriate. Joel highlights the challenges around which books to include in the curation and which books to order for the Library collection—a challenge Library staff are familiar with! Having the confidence to recommend titles, even though he was not able to read or know each one in depth, was a calculated decision. These, again, are areas where the partnership between staff and students supports the development of new skills in terms of finding resources and decision making.

4

Exploring the Impact of the Student Curator Projects

In numerical terms, the Student Curator project has added 271 titles to date to our Library collection, all of which have been selected by the Student Curators. They have spent around £10,000 of the Library collection development fund over the past two years broadening and enriching the collection with books that reflect marginalised voices and represent the interests of our student body. The online reading lists the Student Curators have developed have had over 700 views from the wider University community. The Student Curator social media campaigns have been in the top three for likes across the Library's social media accounts with thousands of Twitter impressions from one post.

The Library has seen a growing interest in the books purchased by the Student Curators, with a growing interest in borrowing books written by BAME authors and other students reserving books from the displays to use to research dissertation topics. Individuals and student societies are coming forward after seeing a display wanting to be involved in the next one, suggesting themes like autism, environmental issues, and sustainability. The wider student community has also seemed empowered through social media to make book suggestions to the Library or fill in comments cards at the displays.

In other projects across campus, some of which are focusing on the BAME attainment gap, Black History month campaigns, and decolonising the curriculum, the Student Curator displays have been referred to. Students have been interviewed about what diversity means to them and how the University of Surrey celebrates or reflects the diversity of its student population, and the interviewees highlight the Student Curator project as an effective student project talking to these issues.

The impact is more than just the numbers, however. Staff from the Library involved in the project have built real relationships with the Student Curators and the wider student community, and gained new perspectives on a whole variety of experiences and issues.

Next Steps for the Student Curator Project

The aims for the project are to keep it evolving, and to keep the themes fresh and impactful. In the new academic year (2020/21), there will be a call for themes and Curators to the wider student community with a wildcard category each year, and for aspiring Curators to write a short nomination piece about themselves and their theme. The wildcard would allow for greater inclusivity of marginalised voices across campus.

The Library team wishes to explore how the on-going work on decolonising the curriculum can be advanced through the Student Curator project. Sector research on closing attainment gaps via curriculum development states that it is vital that any reviews are undertaken in partnership with students (NUS and Universities UK, 2019). Points to consider are the training, preparation, and guidance students need to effectively participate in curriculum decolonisation, and what staff-student partnerships the University of Surrey can offer in this respect.

Further work is required to document and create a narrative to confirm and define the roles within this student-staff partnership. Involving students more heavily in the ongoing management of the facilitation of the projects is another key objective making the project

5

truly student-led, as well as broadening the range of employability attributes the project develops for the Student Curator.

Finally, an important element of the overall project is to provide appropriate reward and recognition for the Student Curators. We had hoped to have a celebration event to provide the opportunity for our Curators to gather together to reflect and share their experiences, and for the institution to recognise their work. In lieu of this, the Library team are working on a site that collates and showcases their work and provides recognition to our Curators. The Library Engagement team and SU will also need to consider how this project continues over the coming academic year with the current COVID-19 related constraints we face.

Concluding Thoughts

The Student Curator project is a staff-student partnership project that is a challenging way of working, but it has introduced great rewards in terms of personal and professional learning. This essay has highlighted the many positives of the projects, but this is not to ignore the challenging issues both staff and students have encountered. The initiative requires significant investment of thought, planning, energy, and creativity from both staff and students to maintain the professional standards of each curation, to keep the momentum going on each project while juggling competing demands and workload pressures, and to feel that justice has been done to the chosen theme.

Everyone involved in the project has witnessed the different things that each student and staff member brings to the partnership to enrich it and make it more effective. We have all concluded that relationships and communication are the most important aspects to a staff-student collaboration. Detailed consideration of the equalising of power, particularly important in some of the more sensitive project themes, also showed how integrity and ethical handling of themes are paramount. Communication around the areas of work, positive active listening from all parties, and constructive feedback allowed us to overcome the challenging aspects. Allowing students to be the experts enabled the development of agency, and the direction of each project evolved through co-creation within the project group.

The attention that the project has attracted has demonstrated that it has the ability to connect people and start conversations. People from various backgrounds, many of whom were not known to the Curators, stopped to look at the displays, reflecting on what each meant to them. One Curation was highlighted in another student project as 'a thing that made them smile' in the Library. Sarah and the project team as a whole felt that validation for the project keenly.

As a team, we hope that by sharing our process, our challenges, and our reflections we can inspire other staff-student partnership projects, support the bravery and push for Library teams to cede some control and power to student communities to co-create dialogues and discussions to challenge the status quo and build upon in the future.

Acknowledgements

6

Library Customer Services and Archive and Special Collections Teams, University of Surrey
Carley Stirups, Harriet Costello, Greg Tank, Marion Lewis, Paulina Czyz, Susan Hill, Andrew Collett, Caroline Horsfield, Helen Stewart and Mike Parkinson.
Student Curators, University of Surrey
Joel Weller, Sarah Surget, Bethany Dawson, Ajay Ajimobi, Nadya Dimitrova, Will Hemsley, Aaron Seabrook and Harriet Seedhouse.

References

NUS and Universities UK. (2019). *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic student attainment at UK universities.* Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.pdf

Weller, J. (2018). *Welcome to Joel – our student curator for Black History Month.* Available at: https://blogs.surrey.ac.uk/librarynews/2018/10/16/welcome-to-joel-our-guest-student-curator-for-black-history-month/