Co-curation in the classroom: networked learning and digital participation in North East England

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Abstract

Digital tools that allow ‘mashups’ of institutional and community-held heritage materials have enabled the creation of place-specific digital resources that provide opportunities for networked learning and the co-production of local knowledge. In this paper, I draw on participatory action research undertaken with a High School in the North East of England in the co-design of Co-Curate, a collaborative digital space where ‘official’ museum, library and archive collections are displayed alongside community material such as oral histories, photographs and films. Users can draw on existing resources or upload their own materials to share their stories of the North East. As a hybrid of the public and private spheres, virtual spaces such as these offer significant opportunities for the democratization of heritage, by not only increasing access to private and public collections, but also enabling multiple perspectives that expand our understanding of heritage and place. Drawing on insights gained into the needs, motivations and experiences of young people, teachers and museum staff, I highlight the shifting dynamics between museums and ‘learner-participants’ in the digital age and identify some of the key challenges for the role of museums in the creation of democratic, shared virtual spaces for intergenerational collaborative learning.

Developing digital participatory space

Digital technology has been heralded as an important tool for empowering individuals and communities to participate in heritage (e.g. Adair et al. 2011; Giaccardi 2012). Digitisation has enabled cultural institutions to provide greater access to their collections, while social media have enabled users to contribute to ‘official’ heritage resources (e.g. tagging objects or curating an online collection). Digital ‘collections-based experiences’ have benefited heritage organisations, by enabling communities to provide new interpretations that enhance our knowledge of those collections (Bevan et al. 2014). At the same time, tools such as blogs, Facebook, Pinterest, and Flickr have enhanced and expanded ‘grassroots’ community heritage, by enabling individuals and communities to document, represent and interpret their heritage publicly online, and on their own terms.

These developments have occurred in parallel with wider debates on participation, engagement and co-production, which have emerged as areas of significant interest within the field of Critical Heritage Studies (e.g. Golding & Modest 2013; Lynch 2009; Simon 2010; Waterton & Watson 2010). Advocates of co-production have stressed the potential for such methods to challenge what Smith (2006) has termed the ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’. Issues of ownership, authority and control are paramount within these debates, with theorists challenging the status of heritage professionals as ‘experts’ and ‘gatekeepers’.
Digital technology has therefore brought new challenges for the role of the heritage professional (and indeed academic) as the authoritative source of objective information and the ‘gatekeeper’ to knowledge (Bayne et al. 2009; Cameron 2010; Trant 2010; Bevan et al. 2014). These are issues that are likely to gain salience, as museums, libraries and archives are making their collections available for reuse online under Creative Commons Licenses via APIs (Application Programming Interfaces). Such developments take heritage resources beyond the walls of the institution and into the unmapped territory of ‘digital space’.

For both researchers and practitioners, understanding users’ experiences of engaging with these forms of digital heritage resources presents significant methodological challenges; the personal and often private nature of these interactions makes accessing participants very difficult. This is especially the case when evaluating the needs of school pupils, who are difficult to recruit as research participants due to legal and ethical issues. Building on previous classroom research into heritage, place and identity (Lloyd 2015), this paper aims to enhance our understanding of the needs of school-age learners, while positioning their experiences within wider debates on co-production and digital participation.

This paper draws upon the case study of the Co-Curate North East project, a participatory action research project that worked with schools and community groups in the North East of England to develop a collaborative digital space that utilised open-access collections in order to enhance citizen research into regional heritage. The focus of this paper is on collaborative research undertaken by staff and pupils at George Stephenson High School, in collaboration with researchers at Newcastle University, UK and staff at Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (TWAM). The paper proceeds as follows. Firstly the motivating principles of the Co-Curate project are outlined, before situating the needs and expectations of ‘learner-participants’ at George Stephenson High School within pedagogical approaches of ‘networked learning’ and ‘authentic historical inquiry’. The paper then explains how the project responded to these needs, through the co-design of the Co-Curate platform. The final sections evaluate the young people’s engagement with the site and draws on these insights to consider the advantages and challenges of such digital tools for both heritage professionals and learners.

Co-curate north east: co-production with ‘citizen researchers’

The Co-Curate North East project was a response to the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding call ‘Digital Transformation in Community Research Co-Production’, part of the Connected Communities Research Scheme. This strand aimed to ‘harness the transformative power of digital technologies to stimulate innovative engagements and research co-production between communities and researchers’ (2013:1). The project was led by an interdisciplinary research team from Newcastle University and staff from Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (TWAM), in partnership with a number of other organisations including the Woodhorn Trust and Schools Northeast.

The project responded to demands from schools and community groups within the North East to access and enhance knowledge of a broad range of museum collections and archives, identified through both the University’s existing engagement work and TWAM’s learning programmes. Schools and community groups are often unable to access collections and archives on-site in their physical form because of distances and costs of travel, or because demand for visits outstrips capacity of the learning teams concerned.

The project team were interested in exploring the ways in which digital technology could be effectively employed to address these pragmatic concerns. The team perceived significant opportunities presented by new approaches to open-access and linked data in the heritage sector, seen in the enthusiastic use of ‘citizen research’ and ‘crowdsourcing’ in many heritage projects. Value for the participants within projects of this nature often lies in supporting research that is personally meaningful, either because it presents an opportunity to learn more about a place through engaging directly with historical collections, or because participants feel they have personal stories or research skills that are of value to the wider understanding of places (Bevan et al. 2014). While ‘participatory’ in nature, control and authority within such projects remains
largely with the institution. In-keeping with the aims of the AHRC programme, the research team aimed to identify strategies that could enable ‘citizen researchers’ to utilise open-access collections to meet their own research agendas, as well as contribute to wider knowledge.

As an action research and participatory project that sought to critically engage with theory and practice, the principles of what Lury and Wakeford (2012) term ‘inventive methods’ were pertinent to the research design. They argue that: ‘it is not possible to apply a method as if it were indifferent or external to the problem it seeks to address, but that method must rather be made specific and relevant to the problem...Further, if methods are to be inventive, they should not leave that problem untouched.’ (2012: 2-3). The Co-Curate project aimed to develop a digital tool that would address both the practical concerns of remote access, while offering new, creative and diverse perspectives on the heritage of the North East of England. We also wanted to develop a resource that would allow researchers to gain insights into the aspects of heritage that schools and communities in the region felt were important to them, with a view to developing further research projects that addressed these needs. The project was motivated by the following questions: How can different communities most effectively access, co-curate and contribute to museum, library and archive collections to enhance their own identity and sense of place? and How can communities be supported in designing appropriate pedagogical methodologies to exploit institutional and community-held collections in different learning contexts?

Co-produced research is messy and time-consuming, as other researchers in the Connected Communities programme have observed (Graham et al. 2014). As a curatorial researcher on the project, my role within the project was challenging; I shifted constantly between ‘expert’, educator, participant observer, mediator and facilitator. However, this approach had provided significant benefits, by enabling a deep understanding of participant needs, motivations and expectations.

Co-producing research: understanding participant motivations

The initial stages of the project focused on approaching schools and community groups with existing relationships with the university researchers to understand how the project could support them. While multiple groups expressed an interest in the early stages of the project, the most enthusiastic response came from teachers at George Stephenson High School. This was primarily due to the strength of the existing relationships held by members of the research team specialising in education.

Early conversations with teachers at George Stephenson focused on how digital technology could be used to enhance existing pedagogical approaches. Teachers at the school are actively involved in developing new educational practices, in collaboration with academic researchers, with a particular focus on methods that increase pupil engagement, responsibility and ownership over their school experience.

It is often wrongly assumed that young people, as ‘digital natives’, possess a sophisticated understanding of digital technology and how best to utilise it to meet their needs. These assumptions are epitomised in the early work of Prensky (2001), who distinguished between the learning habits of ‘digital natives’ (i.e. those who were born in the digital age) and ‘digital immigrants’ (those who ‘migrated’ to it). Many theorists, including Prensky himself, have challenged the usefulness of these distinctions. In his later work (2009), he suggests that we should turn our attention away from generational concerns towards the concept of ‘digital wisdom’. He defines this as follows: ‘Digital wisdom means not just manipulating technology easily or even creatively; it means making wiser decisions because one is enhanced by technology. Therefore, the digitally wise look for the cases where technology enhances thinking and understanding’ (2009: n.p). Digital wisdom (or a lack therefore) is not the preserve of one generation. Instead, it is something that can and should be taught to learners of all ages. He argues that schools should support young people to develop their digital wisdom so that they can effectively utilise and understand the abundance of information available to them via digital technology.
The pedagogical approach at George Stephenson focuses on developing pupils’ digital wisdom. The school invests significant resources in preparing pupils for the digital world and was the first to join the ‘School in the Cloud’, an action research project based on the principles of ‘Self-Organised Learning Environments’ (SOLEs) as a means of enhancing pupil engagement (Mitra 2012). SOLEs emphasise the agency of learners by shifting the focus away from teachers towards enquiry-based, student-centred approaches whereby learning stems from students’ own interests, questions and experiences (Payton & Williamson, 2009). SOLEs utilise technology in order to allow learners to work together to explore ‘big questions’ (i.e. questions that are not easily ‘Googleable’). This technique is primarily used as a means of orientating pupils to a new topic by enabling them to relate it to their existing knowledge, interests or experiences. Pupils then report on their findings to the rest of the class at the end of the lesson. Such methods provide pupils with greater levels of autonomy over their learning, enabling them to pursue a broad range of topics rather than being ‘taught’ key pieces of information (Dolan et al. 2013:12-3). The role of the teacher within this approach is that of a mediator, rather than an instructor. Learners can access a volunteer ‘e-mediator’ (often referred to as ‘Skype Grannies’), who may ask questions or provide additional support (Mitra 2012).

I worked collaboratively with staff and pupils at the school, alongside the wider research team, to understand their requirements and the role that digital technology could play in enhancing the school’s existing pedagogical approach. I visited the school on a frequent basis over 12 months, often spending 2-3 days a week in the classroom, an experience that enabled me to form direct relationships with pupils and, as a relatively young female academic, challenge some of their misconceptions about university and researchers. This was extremely valuable in terms of building their confidence in themselves as ‘citizen researchers’ and understanding the importance of their collaboration with the project.

**Authentic historical inquiry**

Workshops were held with teachers at George Stephenson at the outset of the project to identify their needs and motivations. In these discussions, teachers identified significant benefits in developing strategies that could encourage pupils to access museum, library and archive collections as part of the SOLE methodology. The project was regarded as a means of both familiarising pupils with ‘authentic’ and ‘original source material’, in order to develop their skills of critical analysis, an approach that echoes existing museum practice. Teachers also hoped that the use of these resources would encourage pupils to seek out the help of ‘experts such as curators, archivists and university researchers’, while ‘raising career aspirations’ by introducing them to unfamiliar roles, a motivation that highlights the perceptions of such institutions as authoritative sources of knowledge.

The opportunity for pupils to have ‘real world impact’ by contributing to local knowledge and producing digital resources for a ‘real audience’ was a key motivator for participation in the project. Teachers were interested in designing an online space that could facilitate intergenerational learning, by enabling pupils to collaborate with their peers in other schools in the region, as well as friends, family members, community organisations and ‘experts’. Building on existing pedagogical approaches, they suggested that pupils could use digital technology to combine ‘official collections’ with other sorts of historical resources such as family photographs or transcripts of oral histories with family members or other people from the local community. They hoped that heritage professionals and university researchers would not only add to the resource, but also utilise it as a research tool themselves. Teachers felt that this approach would raise pupils’ self-esteem and increase their sense of pride and belonging in the local community. This pedagogical approach echoes that of Stoddard and colleagues, who argue that digital technology offers an opportunity for learners to contribute to ‘authentic historical inquiry’. They argue that ‘authenticity involves facets of engaging in authentic problems and questions, modelling inquiry on the work of professionals, and producing knowledge communicated for authentic audiences.’ (Stoddard et al. 2015: 126). Drawing on these ideas, the teachers and researchers decided to develop a digital tool that would enable pupils to share their research with their peers and the wider community.
Learner-participants and networked learning

Building on the concept of ‘learner-users’ (Bayne et al. 2009), I suggest that pupils at George Stephenson can be conceptualised as ‘learner-participants’; these learners do not require an educator to guide them towards predetermined learning outcomes dictated by the institution. Rather, they utilise digital technology to explore issues and ideas that are meaningful to them, while also seeking to collaborate with professionals and contribute to intergenerational learning within the wider community.

The needs of learner-participants can be understood within a larger move towards ‘networked learning’, where digital technology ‘is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources.’ (Goodyear et al. 1998: 2, cited in Goodyear & Carvalho 2014: 11). The advantages of networked learning lie in the multi-directional flow of knowledge and learning between institutions, online resources, learners and communities: ‘the richest examples of networked learning involve interaction with online materials and with other people’. (ibid). While networked learning has gained particular salience in recent years, Goodyear and Carvalho argue that digitally mediated interactions will become a normal aspect of everyday life by 2020 (2014:10). It is therefore vital that we understand the needs of these learners and identify the opportunities and challenges this educational paradigm poses for the heritage sector.

Understanding the limitations of existing digital heritage resources

A survey of existing research has identified that current approaches within heritage education need further development in order to realise the radical potential of digital technology to facilitate networked learning. For example, Kraybill (2015) argues that digital heritage resources aimed at High Schools have primarily focused on methodologies for enhancing existing pedagogical approaches, such as new forms of in-situ interpretation, digital ‘handling boxes’ or providing training and resources for teachers. Such resources are useful for teachers and pupils, who are often unable to physically visit a museum, library or archive due to the logistical challenges of geographical distance, travel costs and timetable constraints. However, they may fail to meet the needs of networked learners, as they place too much emphasis on the online materials themselves, rather than building sustainable relationships between knowledge institutions and learning communities (Goodyear & Carvalho 2014).

This situation is symptomatic of the wider preoccupation within the heritage sector with the use of digital technology to recreate the ‘power of the object’. Some educational theorists argue this limits the potential of digital technology and serves to retain the authority of the institution as the provider of knowledge (Bayne et al. 2009). The opportunity to interact with ‘the real thing’ was certainly a motivating factor for the teachers at George Stephenson. However, the object was just one of many starting points for pupils’ research; deep understanding of its significance was not necessarily the primary goal within a learning programme that values confidence, pride and belonging as equally important to developing skills of critical analysis.

Alternative approaches to digital learning

Digital resources that enable learners to conduct independent research using a broader range of materials may be more useful for meeting the creative and diverse needs of learner-participants. In order to explore the potential of such resources, early work with George Stephenson High School focused on discovering whether existing online collections could be utilised by pupils as part of the SOLE methodology. As part of a SOLE class on the theme of ‘make do and mend’ during the Second World War, for example, pupils were asked to carry out research using specific online resources from the Imperial War Museum (IWM) online collections and British Pathé Newsreels available via YouTube.

The results of this initial exercise highlighted a number of challenges for the use of existing online collection search interfaces. Pupils using the IWM site struggled to generate search terms that would retrieve suitable results and had difficulty comprehending the relevance of
the collections they found, even when the terms ‘make do and mend’ appeared in the object descriptions. In contrast, those searching using the British Pathé collections appeared more engaged with the task; pupils stated that they felt the films were more interesting and easier to comprehend as they did not need to read any further information about the material. However, they reported that they found it difficult to remain focused on the task, primarily because YouTube suggested alternative films to watch next, many of which were neither of historical value or related to the topic. It was clear therefore that, despite their existing research skills, pupils faced significant challenges when attempting to conduct independent research using existing online collections interfaces.

**Collections Interfaces as Tools for Participation**

Issues in accessing digital collections are not, however, limited to young researchers. The radical potential of search tools for facilitating participation have been questioned by theorists such as Whitelaw, who argues that ‘search favours expert users, for those who understand a collection’s contents and can query it effectively. It is most ungenerous, ironically, to those most in need of generosity: visitors unfamiliar with a collection.’ (2012: 3). In light of these issues, Trant argues that ‘what is needed are vehicles that enable visitors to traverse a cultural space, and to find information...without necessarily limiting their results to singular collections...it is critical for the creation of meaningful pathways into and through digital heritage collections’ (2010: 210).

**Enhancing Online Collections through APIs**

As open-access and aggregated collections have become more common in heritage practice, interest has grown in improving ‘non-expert’ engagement with these resources. This can be seen, for example, in attempts to enhance the user experience of Europeana, which aggregates open-access digital collections from institutions across Europe to provide a single, searchable access point for digitised European heritage resources. Europeana is actively working with developers to find new ways of providing pathways through the collections, using the Europeana API, which facilitates the creative reuse of the platform’s aggregated collections. One example of this is the Learning Resource Exchange (LRE) (http://lre4schools.eun.org/), which draws on Europeana collections to provide a searchable catalogue of resources aimed at teachers. The collections available are deliberately limited, as the LRE platform aims to provide access to resources that ‘travel well’ within the supranational context of the EU. Resources that are specific to a particular nation, region, ethnic or linguistic group are therefore unlikely to be included. Given these limitations within existing digital initiatives, the Co-Curate project sought to develop a digital tool that could fulfil this need for ‘place-specific’ resources, thus enabling schools and communities within the North East of England to easily access collections that are meaningful to their sense of identity.

**Designing place-specific digital resources**

In response to these issues, the research team aimed to develop a digital platform that could facilitate networked learning, between the university, ‘official’ heritage organisations (such as museums), schools and communities. As a tool for enabling ‘citizen research’, the project team identified two key functions for the digital platform: to make searching for relevant heritage resources easier for schools and community groups in the North East by providing a single, simple search interface; and to serve as digital space for the sharing of new resources between intergenerational users. The design process followed a participatory model, with young people ‘hired’ as co-researchers to undertake evaluation and provide feedback on usability.

The Co-Curate website aims to provide a single access point to a range of collections specific to the North East of England, hosted by regional, national and international heritage organisations (see Figure 1). Although the site was hosted on Newcastle University servers, the project team avoided prominent branding from any of the project partners in order to facilitate a sense of community ownership. Collections are primarily harvested using the Europeana API, with additional relevant material identified and sourced from Flickr and YouTube. The collections on the site include those of Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums, Beamish: The Living Museum...
of the North, and Newcastle Libraries. The nature of the material available through these sources meant that the collections accessible through the site contain primarily photographic images, with a limited range of additional film and sound material.

The design of the site follows a wiki model, whereby registered users can contribute to existing topics or create their own pages by tagging collections on the site, embedding links to other resources or manually uploading their own resources, which are stored remotely on Flickr. The project team developed the initial taxonomy for the site, with collections grouped under key themes such as place or historical period (see Figure 2). Registered users can expand the site taxonomy by creating their own pages on topics of their choice. Although this did not entirely avoid a ‘top-down’ approach to interpretation, it was included to make searching for resources easier and to provide an indication of the site’s functionality.

User testing and development: ‘my tyneside project’

In order to analyse whether this place-specific search tool met the needs of learner-participants, use of the platform was incorporated into George Stephenson’s ‘iLearn programme’, which aims to develop the research skills of pupils in their first year at the school. Pupils undertake an interdisciplinary local area study, combining contemporary and historical perspectives, an example of what Gruenewald (2003) terms ‘place-conscious education’. Engagement with the site was divided into two parts: 1) research and curation of existing resources and 2) intergenerational research and upload of new material to Co-Curate site.

Part 1: ‘My Tyneside’ Exhibition

The first task aimed to introduce pupils to the museum, library and archive collections available to them on the Co-Curate site. With the support of the research team, teachers set the pupils the challenge of co-curating an exhibition utilising online collections available through the Co-Curate site. Each class produced a display panel on a theme, with no restrictions on the subject matter. These were displayed in the exhibition ‘My Tyneside’ at the Great North Museum, a site jointly managed by TWAM and Newcastle University. In addition to this physical exhibition,
each class was asked to produce a page on the Co-Curate site. Pupils were responsible for all aspects of the process, from the online research through to writing the text for the displays and panel design (See Figure 3). Themes were chosen through mediated conversations about pupil interests, followed by a preliminary search of available resources using the Co-Curate platform. Topics chosen included the life of the school’s namesake George Stephenson (‘Father of the Railways’), migration to Tyneside, local traditions, coal mining, famous landmarks, football, local businesses, and coastal wildlife and landscapes (see Figures 4-7).

This first exercise highlighted a number of pertinent issues in relation to both the digital collections themselves and the support and expertise available to the young people in understanding this material.

Locating Resources

The creation of a single access point for researching materials did appear to have some benefits for pupils who chose topics relating to the industrial heritage of the region. This can be attributed, predominantly, to the wealth of resources relating to coal mining, shipbuilding in the physical collections of the region’s museums, libraries and archives. However, despite this abundance of historical material, both pupils and teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the type of collections available, suggesting that the black and white photos and film material on the site were not as visually attractive as resources pupils located elsewhere. While teachers were pleased that pupils had gained access to ‘authentic material’, some felt that these digital collections lacked the ‘wow factor of the real thing’, i.e. being able to hold tangible objects or visiting local heritage sites.

Limitations of Online Collections

Furthermore, the collections available did not cover a sufficient range of topics to meet the needs of many learners. Those who chose to focus on lesser known aspects of the region’s history, such a migration, found it harder to locate relevant material on the Co-Curate site. In order to address these issues, a small number of resourceful pupils decided to contact other local museums and libraries independently to ask for more information about certain topics and images they found on the site. The confidence of these pupils was inspiring, with staff expressing their surprise and pleasure at being contacted.
directly by young people with an interest in local heritage. Teachers felt that the most important aspect of the project was this direct engagement with experts, as it enhanced pupil confidence and laid foundations for building relationships with the wider community, an issue that was fundamental to the second part of the project.

However, many pupils had to identify alternative online and printed resources in order to conduct their research. Here then, we see evidence that supports the argument that within digital learning the ‘authentic status’ endowed on an object through its virtual institutional setting is secondary to users’ practical concerns regarding ‘instant access and flexibility of usage of the object’ (Bayne et al. 2009:111). For these pupils, the value of using ‘official collections’ was negated by the lack of engaging and relevant material.

These issues draw attention to the limits of existing online collections, which represent only a fraction of the physical collections and have often already been ‘curated’ with a particular target audience in mind. While such collection gaps may occur for practical reasons, such as copyright restrictions, or indeed omissions within institutions physical collections, these types of limitations somewhat undermine the potential of digital tools to facilitate open-ended citizen research by influencing and constraining the stories that can be told using existing collections.

Part 2. Intergenerational Research

The second half of the project focused on developing new content for the Co-Curate site. Pupils were encouraged to conduct further research on the history of the local area with the support of family members and people from the wider community and to upload their findings to the George Stephenson High School Community page, created by the lead teacher. Pupils’ contributions included sharing their responses to images on the site, recreating historic images with family members, uploading family photographs of the local area and producing transcriptions of oral histories undertaken with parents and grandparents; all providing valuable insights into social history of the region. Teachers reported that the response to the task was overwhelming, generating a deeper level of engagement and richer set of the responses than similar activities undertaken by previous cohorts without a digital focus.

This part of the project saw increased interaction with the Co-Curate site, with a dramatic rise in unique visitors, and the addition of new topics and content. Three factors appear to have contributed to this. Firstly, pupils were now familiar with the functionality of the site having carried out part 1. They were therefore much more confident using the resource, a finding that highlights the importance of ‘digital wisdom’ to learners’ success. Secondly, teachers gave learners a specific task to focus their research, asking them to choose something that was personal to them, rather than negotiate the interests of a whole class. By asking them either to contribute to, or respond creatively to, one resource, pupils were able to engage with this material in a deeper way. This is one practical example of practice that could potentially be applied to existing collections databases, with appropriate scaffolding.

The third, and most significant factor that contributed to the success of this part of the project was the social and intergenerational aspect of the task; an example of the importance of relationships to the success of networked learning. Teachers reported that family and
community members were enthusiastic about contributing their memories and ideas to a public resource with a real audience. Here, the digital nature of the project does seem to have achieved its goal of adding value to the existing work of the school, motivating new forms of learning and engagement.

Networked learning and sharing expertise

As the project developed, it became apparent that the potential to develop two-way relationships with ‘experts’ who could provide ongoing support for understanding the significance of the digital materials, was just as, if not more, significant for both the teachers and pupils. However, tensions emerged regarding the specialist support offered by heritage professionals. For example, teachers suggested that pupils could Skype ‘experts’ such as university researchers and heritage professionals as part of their research process. While enthusiastic, the project partners unfortunately had limited capacity to engage in these direct modes of digital participation within their existing roles and workloads. Staff at the Great North Museum stated that they felt disenfranchised by the project, as it placed them in a responsive role, a position that was difficult within their existing work models and organisational structure. While they were keen to offer such support in principle, the inflexibility of institutional structures meant that issues such as staff availability, the rapid timescale of the project and institutional strategic priorities resulted in an inability to meet these requirements.

Regrettably, this resulted in the perception amongst some of the teachers that the pupils’ work was undervalued, with some expressing disappointment that there had been no engagement with the pupils’ online contributions from heritage professionals, including project partners. This negative feedback was disappointing, but also significant given wider concerns about the unequal power relations between institutions and communities in the digital sphere (Bayne et al. 2009; Bevan et al. 2014; Cameron 2010). Bayne, Ross and Williams argue that ‘[f]or many users, immersion in the digital environment promises the opportunity not to be ‘given’ a voice, but to ‘seize’ it, to appropriate the institutional capital of the museum and use it on their own terms.’ (Bayne et al. 2009:119). However, the potential for digital modes of participation to facilitate the democratisation of heritage is limited by the willingness or ability of institutions to engage directly with ‘citizen contributions’, an issue that becomes even more pertinent when such interactions take place beyond the physical (and virtual) museum ‘walls’. I am sympathetic to the challenges that staff faced when attempting to engage in digitally mediated relationships. However, as voices of the institution, these staff retained significant power within the eyes of the teachers. As such, their lack of engagement was interpreted as a breakdown in the reciprocal trust required between learners and institutions within the framework of networked learning. In order to address these issues, it is suggested that digital participatory projects factor in significant time for fostering two-way communication between institutions and participants, in order to avoid creating false expectations and damaging emerging relationships.

Conclusion

The Co-Curate project offers a number of valuable insights about both the potential and limitations of digital hybrid spaces for the sharing of heritage resources and knowledge. From a design perspective, we found that digital tools could be used effectively to simplify the research experience, and provide access to a greater range of heritage resources. The creation of a virtual space that facilitated ‘authentic historical inquiry’ enabled learners to share their research with others and enhanced pupils’ confidence and sense of identity. While perhaps not suitable for every educational setting or class project, the project showcases the valuable contribution that young people can make to wider understandings of the heritage of place.

The project also, however, highlights the challenges of engaging in meaningful, digitally mediated relationships and supporting networked learning within current heritage sector practice. Although the project focused on the design of digital tools to enable participation, the most significant challenge that emerged during the project was not an issue of digital technology, but rather centred on social relationships between learners, communities and institutions. This is
an important finding that contributes to debates on the role of digital technology in enhancing ‘citizen heritage’. While digital practices are increasingly a ‘normative’ part of heritage practice (Parry 2013), ‘techno-utopian’ (Bevan et al. 2014) arguments within the sector too often present digital technology as the solution to issues of access, engagement, ownership and collaboration. However, the research has shown that digital technology cannot compensate for problems that stem from ‘offline’ social relationships between institutions and learners.

In an age where both information and communication are expected to be available instantaneously, significant changes in wider heritage practice would be required to enable institutions to meet the needs of ‘learner-participants’. These changes include both the expansion of the range of digital materials available and greater support for learners, through more personal and responsive forms of communication with a wider range of heritage professionals, beyond those in traditional school-focused roles e.g. ‘Learning Assistants’. This mode of working would require changes to traditional institutional structures; Morse (2014) argues that the common divisions within heritage practice between staff with responsibilities for Collections, Community Outreach and Schools results in silos that create a barrier to embedding participatory approaches within institutions.

While challenging, I argue that the positive experiences of the young people at George Stephenson High School present a convincing case for exploring new models of working that meet the needs of this age group and indeed support wider ‘citizen heritage’. The utilisation of digital technology is merely one tool through which to achieve this however. I therefore suggest that we must shift our priorities away from technological innovation per se, towards understanding and meeting the needs of ‘learner-participants’ and the people who make places.

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**Endnotes**

1 Connected Communities is a multi-million pound research programme led by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council: ‘It aims to achieve: new insights into community and new ways of researching community that put arts and humanities at the heart of research and connect academic and community expertise.’ https://connected-communities.org/