

Report on Research-Informed Teaching Initiative, 07-08

Dr Gemma Blackshaw, Art History

Project title:

Art History Field-Trip for Research-Informed Teaching

Details of project team:

G Blackshaw (art history lecturer, team leader and module leader for ARHI 232/335)

M Costello (art history post-graduate student with *Vienna 1900* research specialism)

19 stage 2/3 art history and fine art/art history students on ARHI 232/335

Summary of the aims of the project:

To take a group of students on a 3-day field-trip to Vienna following their completion of the 10 week lecture/seminar component of ARHI 232/335 ('The Interdisciplinary City' - a 20 credit module on the art and culture of *Vienna 1900* which I devised and successfully validated in 2005). The module reflected my own research interests in *Vienna 1900* and I taught it for a second time in academic year 07-08. I wanted to improve on the module by including a field trip element which would teach students site-specific research skills and encourage them to become stake-holders in the field of *Vienna 1900* studies. For their assessment, students had to complete a research file on the trip on an image/object they had seen on one of their visits, which they then developed into an essay on their return to the UK.

Methods used:

The trip was preceded by the delivery of ARHI 232/335- a 10-week lecture/seminar programme delivered by myself. The first 6 weeks of the course were primarily **research-led**, ie. students learning about research findings in my field. As the students became more familiar with the course content, the seminar sessions became increasingly **research-oriented**, ie. students learning about and evaluating research methods used in recent years by *Vienna 1900* scholars. In the last session of the course I introduced students to the layout of Vienna through a 'Google Earth' session and an engagement with historical *and* contemporary maps of the city centre and sites which we would visit. Once on the trip, I devised 3 days of supervised gallery, museum, historical building and private collection

visits, delivering short introductory/orientation lectures of 15 minutes before each visit. The students also had talks from curators, conservators and collectors at many of the sites visited. Each student was introduced to the following **research-based** skills:

- On-site picture analysis (which differs significantly from picture analysis done with reproductions in books or powerpoint presentations)
- Data collection (using, for example, written and audio gallery guides, exhibition catalogues, wall texts, current newspaper and journal reviews)
- On-site analysis of gallery and museum spaces (critical approaches to exhibition curating and object display)
- Investigative learning (students encouraged to use local resources- gallery guides, exhibition catalogues, Q&A sessions with curators- to investigate their chosen image/object.
- Research file management (students had to keep organised notes of their visits, keeping track of and prioritising the information they gathered, the sources that were recommended, the images/objects they encountered, and the visits they made)
- Translation of material gathered from trip to assessment completed at home (students had to transform their research files of **primary material** into an evaluative essay which engaged with **secondary material** and placed their chosen image/object in the broader context of the development of modern art and culture in *Vienna 1900*.)

Number of students involved:

19 students participated out of a cohort of 29.

Findings/ outcomes/ impacts:

- Feedback on the trip and in student evaluation forms was outstanding. Students felt they had become art historians.
- Student confidence and ambition soared, as did the number of their successful applications for summer placements and voluntary positions at places such as: Whitechapel Gallery, Tate Britain, Tate St. Ives, Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Spacex Contemporary Art Gallery, Plymouth Arts Centre and Peninsula Arts.
- Fostering of professional development- students felt they had something to *talk* about at interview for jobs and postgraduate study. 2 students who sat on the first 05-06 ARHI 232/335 module and 1 student from this field trip group went on to receive unconditional offers on gallery and museum studies MAs at Portsmouth and Manchester and Leeds University *and* to be selected by those institutions for consideration for AHRC funding.

- Creation of a mutually-beneficial dialogue between student and tutor- students involved as active researchers rather than passive recipients of ideas.
- The external examiner congratulated the module for encouraging 'research excellence' in the student body.
- As 1 student noted in their module evaluation form: 'I felt part of it. I felt like what I had to say was important. I could argue with those books!'

Continuation/ dissemination plans:

I was interviewed by the EDaLT team in February 09 and presented to the LTHE group in May 09 on the last TQEF project I supervised. I completed a report on the RiT initiative on February 08, and this evaluative report in April 09.

I am running the ARHI 232/335 module again in 09-10 and want to offer the trip again, fully supported by TQEF so that *all* students can benefit. The research skills and assessment for the trip will be geared slightly differently towards their professional skills development. The outline of this is as follows:

Proposed Project Title:

Research on Show: developing art history curators of the future

All students will be asked to devise a 1-room exhibition on a theme they have identified within Vienna 1900 studies. Their exhibition- which will only exist on paper- will include 6 objects, selected from those they have seen on their trip to Vienna. They will identify and complete a detailed visual analysis of each object, and build up a research file of relevant textual and visual material gathered on the field trip. Once home, they will complete for assessment a rationale for their exhibition (500 words), labels for each object selected (480 words in total), and an exhibition catalogue entry for one object included (1500 words). **In addition** to all the research skills listed above under 'Methods Used', this work will facilitate students to:

- Become stake-holders in the module and the field of Vienna 1900 studies by curating their own exhibition.
- Engage in problem-based learning (such as what criteria to use when selecting images, or how to encapsulate an object in an 80-word label to be read by a non-specialist exhibition visitor).
- Develop their critical thinking regarding the translation of complex intellectual ideas for a broad audience in terms of display, text, environment and outreach.
- Develop their field-trip experience and exhibition-research into part of their Pebblepad online portfolio, perhaps in the form of critical commentaries, video, or blogs. For example, some students could choose to produce a digital, 3-dimensional

version of their exhibition which they could think through in terms of architectural and graphic design.

This proposed project would have the added distribution benefits of:

- Use of the module at the end of year degree shows. Art History is not usually included in the degree shows. The assessment for ARHI 335 could be developed into a wall display, with visual and textual material re-creating the exhibitions that each art history student devised.
- The students could present their proposed exhibitions to the Plymouth Arts Centre and Peninsula Arts curatorial team at a forum organised by myself. They would receive feedback on how successful their 'pitches' were and advice on how they could be improved for gallery and museum audiences. This would embed the art history subject more firmly within the local visual arts community.