

**Title:** Arts university student mentors and gallery peer leaders: partnerships for learning

**Abstract:** This case study describes a partnership between University College Falmouth (UCF) and Tate St. Ives (TSI). Framed within a national *Enquire* project (one strand of a DCMS funded commissioning programme) investigating the learning benefits of gallery education, the report tells the story of a successful collaboration which engaged undergraduate Art student mentors from UCF in a peer leadership project at TSI. The project was evaluated using an innovative action research model to explore peer learning *through* engagement. Outcomes suggest undergraduate student mentors enhanced their learning in a number of ways: experientially developing the 'soft' transferable skills related to employability in the arts; improving their knowledge of employment opportunities in gallery settings; gaining competence in action research.

**Keywords:** Peer mentors; partnerships; undergraduate learning in galleries

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University College Falmouth (UCF), a specialist arts institution with a long history of teaching Fine Art, has developed a strong commitment to Widening Participation and embeds peer mentoring as a key part of its retention activities. Tate St. Ives (TSI) is one of four physical Tate sites. The gallery opened in 1993 to celebrate the legacy of artists living and working in St Ives, showing their work in the context it was made. Both institutions recognise real barriers to inclusion in relation to the involvement of young people, given the socio-economic context of Cornwall, a rural and remote county in the south west of England.

In 2008, UCF were looking for local partners to enhance employability agendas beyond their mainstream, practice-based curriculum. TSI approached UCF as a research partner to explore its peer leadership training, bringing limited pump-priming funding from *Enquire* (see *Enquire*, 2008). The focus of the project was on learning *through* engagement, as undergraduate student mentors worked on a peer leadership project. The purpose of the research was to identify learning between peer mentors, gallery facilitators and young people.

The story of the collaboration is told through an action research partnership. UCF and TSI staff recorded the planning, development and delivery of this sustainable peer-led initiative, addressing the question: what frameworks and strategies can engage undergraduate student mentors to support peer-led learning in an art gallery context?

The research was informed by three complementary strands of literature.

First, the growing academic research on peer mentoring (often considered part of effective interventions by student support services in HE to ensure success and retention). This includes the involvement of second and final year undergraduates

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working with first years, targeting areas normally associated with high rates of withdrawal and failure (Saunders & Gibbon, 1998), in which mentors are the 'complementary' facilitators empowering students to become pro-active learners. Student mentor characteristics were analysed by Terrion & Leonard (2007), emphasising psycho-social functions including: communication skills; supportiveness; trustworthiness; interdependence; empathy; shared values; enthusiasm and flexibility, alongside a willingness to commit time in a helping relationship. Student mentors were described as peer learning assistants by Smith (2008), who highlighted the tutoring of individuals through email and the organisation of extra-curricular study.

Second was the national and local policy literature around engaging young people in the work of galleries (DCMS, 2003, DfES, 2004, 2005) which raises issues around the need for youth-friendly arts spaces and best practice in working with young people in the arts. At a regional and local level, the practical challenges of doing so are explored (KEAP, 2006, Harland & Kinder, 1999) and examples of peer-led programmes of work-based activity for young people are described (Tate, 2005, Pringle, 2006).

Third was the developing literature on HE/gallery learning partnerships, some of which suggests a frustration around the lack of HE/museum collaboration to support student learning. Reynolds & Speight (2008) report a positive small scale study 'scaffolding' the HE learner to 'look' in the gallery, while Butcher & Kennedy (2009) explore the potential for more active HE/gallery collaboration.

### **Description of initiative**

UCF's three undergraduate Fine Art and Design peer mentors were sampled from a well-established cross-institutional programme which selected, trained and monitored a large team of Year 2 volunteers. Peer mentoring at UCF was conceptualised as primarily a support rather than a teaching/academic role, with tasks aligned with the student journey in Year 1:

- Pre-entry support for new students (including e-mentoring at a distance and phone/texting support before they arrive)
- Induction support in first two weeks (including face-to-face social/pastoral support)
- Ongoing 'critical contact' (including pro-active interventions at times associated with stress, such as the first assessment, or not wanting to return after Xmas vacation).

Mentors were paid (a little) by the Widening Participation office as part of strategic retention activities. This project was offered as an extra-curricular enhancement to all (approximately 80) mentors, and the three who saw it through were self-selecting (they volunteered and could commit for the duration) and supported by a tutor reference. The activity was parallel to the mainstream curriculum, since as a pilot it was not accredited and was not embedded into summative assessment.

TSI's three volunteer peer leader recruits (aged 16-25) together with the three student mentors (aged 22-25) took part in a two day Peer Leaders training course at TSI, and a half day introduction to collecting research data at UCF. The two day training (based on models developed across the other Young Tate sites), consisted of three key elements across a weekend: an introduction to working in galleries; activities to develop leadership skills; exploration of the exhibition in situ. By exploring team-building and engaging with work in the galleries on day one, and with day two developing the idea of leadership, the mentors developed an understanding of working with groups at TSI. Working as a team, the group of mentors and peer leaders then built on these experiences over a two month period to devise and deliver a Young Tate event at TSI aimed at 13 - 25 year olds. This process involved leading a workshop with 12 other young people to make costumes in response to artworks in

the exhibition, and working closely with the Learning Team to coordinate, market, manage and document the final event, culminating in an evening event titled *Come as you art!* This included: a fashion show of the costumes modelled by the young people themselves; music; a variety of interactive activities; and dress code inviting guests to come dressed as an artwork from the Tate Collection.

## Evaluation

Data-capturing methods were developed in collaboration with the student mentors participating, who were actively included in the process of analysis. The research explored the nature of peer learning in the context of a peer-led, work-based initiative in which students worked with each other and with gallery staff. In seeking to capture best practice in peer leadership training, the use of student voices was highlighted in the collaborative methodologies, with students shaping the research and included in the analysis. The six methods of data collection (timed responses on 'Drawing a Day' blank OS maps; 'pub quiz' knowledge survey; focus group interviews at the end of each training day; one-to-one interviews; field notes and observation data of the subsequent event recorded in photographs, film, and paper-covered table-tops) captured evidence of learning and reflections on learning in an authentic gallery setting.

The data collected addressed the learning experience throughout the training course and over a period of three months when participants applied the training to real situations. Methods were informed by the *Inspiring Learning for All* framework (MLA, 2004), a flexible structure for evaluation of learning in gallery and museum settings including Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs).

## Evidence

Findings, though tentative given the small numbers involved, were positive. The wide range of data collected was analysed using the framework of the GLOs. In terms of knowledge and understanding, at the start of the project, undergraduates from UCF were valued as coming with a minimum of 12 months student mentoring experience, and thus having a strong awareness of working in a peer-led, student-centred context. TSI peer leaders had an existing knowledge of visual art, gallery structures and programmes. The very active approach to learning designed into the collaborative activities during the training course appeared to support effective learning:

*'I've learnt how, in transferring a piece of artwork into an activity, it helps you understand it and contribute from other points of view and you go away remembering the piece of artwork.'*

In terms of skills, analysis suggests the key skills for being an effective peer leader are communication and management (including self-organisation, problem-solving, time-management and decision-making). These skills were developed over a longer period through the planned, work-based learning opportunity, which might have been different from prior learning experiences:

*'I also like working under pressure as well...like quickly, that was fun...I think going with your first instinct is quite a good one'*

In terms of attitudes and values, a key change was observed in trust and confidence in sharing. Participants noted the work-based learning context was an important element in enabling learners to test out their ideas (e.g. interpretation) as part of the training. Not only was an enhanced attitude towards the role of the gallery demonstrated, this was achieved through co-learning and collaboration:

*'I was surprised by quite how quickly the group kind of moulded...at the start it was quite distant and calm, and by the end we were all just kind of joining in'.*

The objectives around activity, behaviour and progression were particularly interesting. Significant learning occurred during the training days through dialogue between student mentors, young people and gallery staff, resulting in an autonomous 'learning without realising' and a shared aspiration that 'there shouldn't be any people excluded from a gallery'. For example:

*'I think if I had just come on my own, I don't think I would have been as much involved with the artwork itself. But doing this session I've learnt a lot and different aspects...of the gallery'.*

Perhaps most pleasingly, the data suggested a high level of enjoyment, inspiration and creativity had been achieved through the Peer leader training. Participants reported feeling challenged, but the experience of meeting the challenges had been stimulating (due, as they said, to teamwork, peer support and working in an informal context):

*'I think in a way, part of the challenge has been bringing yesterday's enthusiasm over to today. By the end of yesterday we were all kind of 'yeah!' And we managed to bring that to this morning as well'*

The final outcome (a successful planned show) was both a motivating achievement and evidence of self-development. This outcome can be represented as the training having a significant impact on learning, due to the transfer of 'ownership' of a gallery activity from staff to young people, who were supported in their initiative by undergraduate student mentors. Learning from the training days (such as knowledge about working in galleries, creative problem solving) was complemented and enhanced by the subsequent work-based peer-led activity.

## **Challenges**

It is noteworthy that previous attempts to forge partnerships between UCF and TSI across the 25 mile divide from the south to the north coast of Cornwall had foundered, suggesting a lack of trust, or a lack of a shared language, or a lack of motivation, or even a lack of awareness of potential benefits (any of which might be common to partnerships involving HE). However, this proposal was timely as UCF were actively seeking to research the effectiveness of their peer mentors and TSI had recently increased their staff resource. By focussing on an area of mutual interest – peer mentors/peer leaders in an authentic learning situation – those previous barriers were overcome.

## **Conclusion**

By the end of the project, it was notable that UCF student mentors showed a significant leap in general knowledge of Tate and TSI, including the mission, ethos and function of TSI and its staff. This contributed to an improved insight into the potential range of employment opportunities in gallery settings. Outcomes suggest that the voluntary engagement of undergraduate art students in an extra-curricular gallery-based project like this can enhance their skills development (particularly in relation to the 'soft' transferable skills associated with employability), and that of their peers. In addition, by being active participants in the action research data collection and analysis, the student mentors experienced an insight into the student researcher model.

A relevant example of the impact on employability came from one student mentor, who had always known she wanted to be a secondary art teacher, and following her degree aimed to complete a PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education). After completing the collaborative gallery training, she decided to apply for a SCITT (School-Centred Initial Teacher Training) course because she recognised she enjoyed work-based learning and felt this would be a more interesting and rewarding pathway to becoming a teacher.

This case study has also demonstrated the range of evidence that a student mentor might gain from this sort of extra-curricular activity. While this was not accredited as part of the UCF degree (partly because as a pilot project it was time-limited), it seems the impending advent of the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) offers an ideal context in which the skills and attributes from this 'parallel' learning experiences could be captured, thus further emphasising the value of the learning partnership.

While the HE role in this collaboration was to select trained mentors and to advise on the participative action research approach, there is no doubt that there was an effect on the institution. For example, WP colleagues discovered a great deal about work-based learning opportunities afforded by the peer leaders training, which have subsequently been shared around the college. Less obviously, the 'partnership effect' was to 'oil the wheels' of ongoing initiatives like the potential development of an MA in Curatorial Practice in collaboration with TSI. It has also provided evidence to the college that research into HE/gallery partnerships should be participative research and to make this happen more often, there is a pressing need to explore the potential of new technologies in creative research methodologies.

A key conclusion from the case study is that the active role of undergraduate student mentors in such a collaborative HE/gallery project can galvanise the work of curators with young people, and a recommendation would be to extend the work of undergraduate student mentors nationally to explore best practice in gallery Peer Leadership schemes. The crucial transferable element from this project lies in the recognition that, for HE/gallery partnerships to work and be sustained, an attention needs to be given at the design stage to mutuality – the shared outcomes of mentor/peer leader learning via authentic tasks that are part of a gallery's work, rather than an expectation from HE that galleries are a setting for relatively passive research.

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