

Digital Strategy for the Curating for Change Project

Introduction

Curating for Change is a project that will tackle the significant under representation of D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in Museums – both in the collections and in the workforce. To bring about the change we strive for, we need to communicate with the museum sector and the wider public, demonstrating best practice and innovation as well as engaging narratives about disability history. We also need to give a platform to our Fellows and Trainees to tell the stories of the research they are uncovering and of their experiences on the scheme. We anticipate that by building their profiles within the sector, this will show other disabled people a career in museums could be a reality for them. Therefore, digital communication via website and social media will be crucial. We also want to harness what worked well during the pandemic in terms of digital engagement, as many disabled people were liberated by no longer needing to be “on site” when perhaps their health meant they were unable to engage, or that environments were inaccessible to them. Consequently, we will trial new technologies such as haptics and telepresence robots to push the boundaries of digital engagement with museums and collections.

This plan outlines the main elements of our proposed digital activity.

Digital infrastructure of the Curating for Change project

The main components of our plan are:

- channels for our cohort to communicate with each other
- a website for the project reaching both museum professionals and a public audience
- options for two online symposia events
- a presence on social media
- supporting exhibitions with digital content
- the potential to accommodate some new wave digital (such as VR and AR, and new robotics) which is already being experimented with by Screen South
- the project will also have a part-time Digital Editor to support this work.

Behind the Scenes connectivity between our Fellows and Trainees

Curating for Change Fellows and trainees will be spread across the country, but an important part of the project will be creating channels where everyone involved can compare notes, discuss problems and their potential solutions – and offer support. This is something we can discuss in more detail at the point when we have recruited all Fellows and Trainees, but strong contenders for this digital infrastructure include:

- A project development type channel such as Slack – recently successfully used for the [We Shall Not Be Removed](#) campaign. Our feedback from that initiative indicates that the free version was adequate, that personal invitations created a safe and regulated environment, and that despite a busy channel of 700 users, moderators only needed to evict a participant once during a nine month period. However, no software of this kind is completely accessible, and the proliferating threads caused ‘overwhelm’ for some users. Ways to address this include short filmed summaries, a

single thread containing core information, and a specific newsletter for Slack channel users: again, distilling the breadth of ideas in simpler form.

- A more informal connectivity potentially through WhatsApp, or a closed Facebook group.
- Some form of online meeting software – Zoom being the most obvious, but with [Blue Jeans](#), [Webinar Jam](#) and [Crowdcast](#) worth a look.

As our Fellows will be in post for 18 months, whereas our Trainees will have a “taster” placement of 40 days (albeit likely to be part time, so over a period of perhaps three or four months) we are likely to create one space where all those involved in the project can talk, but also channels for each cohort to concentrate on specific concerns. For example, Trainees may be job seeking or considering next steps a year ahead of Fellows. We aim to offer structured online events to support people at each stage.

Fellows will meet once a month to receive training, hear expert speakers and share their work. These meetings and events will be delivered through a combination of live and online sessions, with the potential for online learning materials also being made available. Using a blend of online and face to face events also enables us to approach international speakers to inspire our Fellows and Trainees.

A web presence for the project

Our aim is that all museums hosting a Fellow or trainee for this project will carry material on their own websites and social media promoting Curating for Change. This will highlight what each museum learned, future plans and the exhibitions and events generated through the project.

Nevertheless, we think it is also essential for the project to have its own home online, giving a coherent big picture, and providing a central hub for resources and discussion.

We intend to reach two audiences:

- Museum professionals interested in our approach and outcomes – with a view to showcasing what our disabled participants have achieved and spreading good practice and changed attitudes. **Two of our sector-facing events to spread the learning points of this project will be online – recordings, blogs and toolkits will also be held on the site.**
- The general public, particularly but not exclusively the 20% or so of the whole UK workforce who are disabled. They will be able to see programming across the country, and either visit or experience online. It will also encourage disabled people across the country to see work in museums as a potential career.

It is expected the website will include:

- A presentation of each placement, with images, audio, BSL, and captions to exemplify good practice.
- Search by participants, museums, themes, locations and the medium of delivery (e.g. in museums, online or both).
- Resources including films and toolkits generated by the project, and a wider list of relevant materials from other projects.
- Listings and marketing of upcoming events and exhibitions.



- Blogs written by Fellows about their experiences.
- A collection of stories and artefacts that are uncovered by Fellows during their research.

The website will also be a way of demonstrating both strength in numbers – and excellence in results, which itself becomes a way of protecting participants from the unvoiced discrimination in the sector.

Flood the space with a whole group of disabled trainee curators with conspicuously desirable skills and it begins to lessen the personal and professional social costs borne by a tiny group of professionals who are still outliers.

Not reinventing the wheel

We are working with [Thirty8 Digital's](#) new Museum Platform concept to host our site. Built on Wordpress, it comes pre-customised for typical museum needs – from collections to timelines, event pages and blog posts.

This will allow our Fellows and Digital Editor to effortlessly pull in functionality including:

- a timeline significantly better than standard free Wordpress plugins
- maps which embed in any page
- collections functionality, with a search facility powered by Sim (used by many major nationals) and the ability to upload collections via spreadsheet.
- embedding collection objects into blogs and stories
- importing Sketchfab objects
- capacity to carry audio on the site itself (as well as pull in from e.g Soundcloud)
- an exhibitions strand to pull together objects and content from across the site
- a format for narratives that is designed for in-gallery touchscreens. Stories can therefore be created online to easily display in the real world.
- an event calendar that pulls in data from existing Eventbrite records – no need to key in information twice.

We think this will give a richness to our content, while cutting down both on development time and in the time spent by the Digital Editor in the initial organisation of the site.

Digital Editor

We will appoint a Digital Editor to support the online aspects of the project. We have a budget of £10k over approximately two years to support a part-time Digital Editor. Time spent will vary over the life of the project, but we anticipate roughly 9.5 days during the first quarter working with the developer on the site setup and getting content together as well as supporting the first cohort of Fellows and Trainees, then roughly seven days a quarter for the majority of the project, reducing to approximately 3.5 days for the last quarter as the project activity decreases and the site is mothballed. However we are open to discussion about how the days could work.

Tasks will include:

- contribute to the design process and content population of the site
- set up newsletter and marketing programme to attract public



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- also a second newsletter or communication channel for the sector
- help promote the recruitment of Fellows and Trainees
- edit and give feedback as necessary blogs from Fellows
- write engagingly about the project as a whole
- manage a social media presence on agreed channels, probably Facebook, Twitter and Instagram
- promote exhibitions, workshops and other public facing events
- act as an additional knowledge bank on digital good practice – including keeping an eye across the museum sector, and at projects such as VISTA-AR and the Nesta working from home research, to make use of new information that becomes available mid-project.

BSL and audio for the website

We would like to provide an introduction filmed BSL interpretation for the website. We already have short BSL interpreted films from each museum about the recruitment process which also may potentially be included on the site. In addition, we intend to carry most or all of the audio, BSL and captioned films created by our Fellows for exhibitions and events on our website as well. This will come out of the exhibitions segment of the budget, but round out our online offer.

Digital innovations that our partner museums will develop during this project

Collections

“I know, for example, when we were working on the LGBTQ+ project and talking to collectors/curators, they just had no idea that all of this related stuff was in the collections. They had no idea how to find it. Once we spoke to them about some search tools they can use and database. How they can bring out these stories. So that they can feel comfortable enough to actually look at them themselves. If they had not had that training and they do not have the confidence to do that those parts of the collection are often just going to be ignored.” – focus group participant, 2020

One of the barriers to events and exhibitions on the history of d/Deaf and disabled people is the limitations of what can currently be found in collections cataloguing. We will support Fellows and Museums to revisit cataloguing systems to enable better ways of identifying and accessing disability related materials. We anticipate that the project will help spread the best ideas between partners.

We are also very excited by the possibilities for showcasing and generating curated digital collections from Thirty8 digital's The Museum Platform and will be looking at ways to ensure this has a central function for engagement via our website.

A review of the museums' general offers to disabled public and staff

It is notable how even the preliminary discussions with museums signed up to this project has focused minds – while many have deployed basic access measures, such as captioning on film, those who have not now have it as a priority. Many also hope that through the

presence of Fellows, Trainees and our knowledgeable project support, they will learn how to optimise their museums for disabled users, both on and offline.

The 'Hastings Robot'

One example of more exciting and innovative work is a telepresence robot developed by Double Robotics, deployed by Hastings Contemporary as part of Accentuate's wider work with the D4D project, during lockdown when access to the museum was otherwise impossible. Up to five visitors could log on to the robot and then have a live interactive guided tour with a member of the museum team. They could choose where the robot went and what they wanted to look at, and ask questions of the guide at the same time. It also offered an opportunity for those five visitors to engage with each other from any location, with the exhibits and the guide opening up conversations that might not otherwise have been possible. This hugely increases the sense of agency. We have also previously experimented with using the robot so that a disabled person could attend a live conference – able to move around crowds during tea breaks, and network like a live participant.

This is still very much in the pilot stage, but cheap for innovative technology and affordable to smaller venues. It has so far been very popular and enthusiastically reviewed by the press – we can see that some of our partners are likely to be enthusiastic about working with it – alongside more routine work in digital to make sure that their offer is optimised for disabled people.

[More on the robot's use for remote-controlled gallery tours](#) at Hastings Contemporary. The History of Place project experiments with [using the robot remotely at a conference for professional updating](#), networking and interaction, in a way that is not possible when using a simple livestream.

We now think the best and most affordable telepresence robot on the market is the [Ohmnilabs version here](#) - which can be purchased for £3k. Accentuate now has two of these robots which we were able to purchase thanks to an ACE grant to ensure that the Head of Programme can attend any necessary meetings while shielding. This robot can also be used with our partner museums to trial small scale interactions and by other disabled participants, including Fellows.

Sector facing public reach and advocacy

Creating the new Strategic Disability Museum Network

We have developed good relationships with the other groups working to promote best practice in Museums and to represent disabled people across arts and culture, including the University of Leicester, MA, AIM, Museums DCN, VocalEyes and DASH Arts. We have recently formalised these relationships with the creation of the Museums Strategic Disability Network. This will itself meet largely online, and offer a forum for co-ordinating digitally-driven messaging, and advocacy and sharing best practice across the sector.

Running our project as part of a large museum group

The relatively large number of our partners, and their in-house communications and social media will also give us visibility and reach – which will cut across both the general public and museum professionals with its messaging. Crucially, it will offer several role model opportunities - as our Fellows and Trainees talking about their work and experiences – and



we will encourage museum partners to spread their first-person accounts, as well as their projects, across a variety of platforms.

Some of our museum partners also have 'lab' sites, largely read within the sector, for example Bristol Museums at <http://www.labs.bristolmuseums.org.uk/> and Science Museum Group.

Programming online to reach the wider sector

As mentioned above, we intend two of our sector-facing events to be online, to reach the widest possible professional audience.

Twitter as a change accelerator - and the museum sector's town square

It has sometimes been a valid criticism that museums have been so comfortable on twitter that they have been slow to adopt some of the other platforms that are out there – it's only really been in the last year that the sector has begun to get the hang of TikTok, for instance.

Nevertheless, the concentration of museum professionals on twitter has made it incredibly effective when the sector needs to talk to itself – accelerating change far more quickly than you would previously see when raising issues at a conference. It has given visibility to campaigns championing marginalised issues and groups, and allowed people who might be isolated in individual institutions to find each other. Just a few change groups that have sprung up in the last few years include:

- MuseumDetox @museum_detox, speaking for people of colour working in museums
- Clare Madge, who in her blogging and tweeting as Tincture of Museum @TinctureofMuse drove significant change in the museum offer for visitors with autism
- Museum Freelance @museumfreelance, Front of House @FoHmuseums and Fair Museum Jobs @fair_jobs, which have used their platforms to gain traction on poor employment practice and lack of career development pathways
- A wider group over the past decade who have brought LGBTQI programming from the periphery to the museum mainstream,

We intend to act in the same spirit through our @Curating4Change platform – in tandem with other members of the Museums Strategic Disability Network, our partner museums, our Fellows and Trainees and (we feel certain) a growing number of museum professionals who already are wanting to engage. We also aim for themed discussion on the popular @MuseumHour sessions, and possibly look to spread good practice via the heritage equivalent, @HeritageChat.

Conclusion

As we have seen from the enthusiastic engagement from our museum partners, there's no lack of will in theory, in a genuinely progressive sector, for a more equitable workforce which includes and supports disabled people. However, that theory is continually falling down in practice – whether that's with HR departments with a narrow idea of 'reasonable adjustments' or museums too driven by financial imperatives to improve. The good news is that well-publicised good practice, the positive use of peer pressure and visible leadership from museums of all sizes has genuine power to shift these norms.



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A strong presence in the space we all now inhabit – the digital world – and continual strong reinforcement over time through blogging, digital innovation, events, and social media discussion, has genuine power to shift practice and make it stick. In many ways, there could not be a more ideal time to champion new ways of working, and intervene before museum drift back to old habits instead of seizing an opportunity for change, made uniquely possible by the evolving digital landscape.

We believe that a strong digital plan - flexible to the significant changes in digital and real world norms that will continue over the next two years - means that we can also engineer the sort of shift already achieved by other marginalised groups, and embed disabled people as a natural part of the museum workforce.

At a glance: digital infrastructure for Curating for Change

This list is created roughly in order of need – from essential to nice-to-haves, although the top four elements (website/social media/Slack channel/Digital Editor) are all interlinked with each other and equally necessary.

- Curating for Change website
- Digital Editor
- Slack channel and/or WhatsApp and Facebook Group – chosen in discussion with Fellows and trainees once recruited.
- Social media – with options including twitter, Facebook, Instagram and possibly others
- Zoom or similar channel for peer to peer meetings and Museum Partner Networks
- BSL film/s
- Storage online of the digital assets created for exhibitions and gallery events.
- Two professional learning events delivered digitally
- Telepresence robot (and experiments with haptics)

Curating for Change Management and Maintenance Plan

This Management and Maintenance Plan (MMP) sets out the Accentuate approach to the long-term care of the digital assets developed by the Curating for Change project: both during the duration of the live project, and for a minimum of five years afterwards, so that its insights and resources can continue to be shared across the sector. It also demonstrates Accentuate UK's compliance with NLHF's terms of grant and guidance on digital projects.

Accentuate UK's existing systems

Accentuate UK has a track record of delivering and preserving a website and associated resources with the History of Place project which ended in 2018. (The website is at <http://historyof.place>). Accentuate is part of Screen South which has an extensive knowledge of film and digital projects. We are therefore an experienced pair of hands, and will have support in place for foreseeable problems, including

Our systems will comply with NLHF guidance by being:

- Available for the term of the grant

- Useable for five years after completion of the project
- Meeting at least W3C Single A accessibility standard.
- Use open source technologies wherever that is a viable option.

During the project we will

- Create a website on open source software (Wordpress), which will be customised specifically for museum use, but be capable of being supported by any Wordpress developer, if for any reason the developer is unable to continue with support either during or after the project.
- The site will be accessible on all screen sizes, and all major browsers and platforms still supported by their creators.
- Work with a Digital Editor who will have responsibility for finding the correct technical support to promptly deal with bugs, spammers and if the site temporarily goes down.
- Have the support of a reputable web host and have technical support throughout the project, probably through the site developer.
- Collaborate with museums and have appropriate written agreements with partner museums about hosting their images on the Curating for Change website, and ensuring that appropriate copyright processes are observed.
- We will also ensure that all images used are of a sufficiently high quality, regardless of user screen size.
- Use various other technology including social media and remote meeting software.

Post-project support

The measures below will of course all be in place during the project – these are what we will keep in place afterwards to make sure the site remains live and useful.

Passwords	Keeper for passwords for website and all digital assets of the project – also for email contact for the site	Screen South
Content	If occasional pieces of relevant content need adding to the site, or essential updating to the copy is needed after the end of the project (we do not anticipate a huge volume).	Screen South
Site hosting and maintenance		Identify host for site – but likely to be either hosts for other Screen South projects, or the developers who built the site, who will host during the live phase of the project
Security patches and upgrades	Plan for regular upgrades to the system to prevent hacking. Responsible person to act if the site falls over or is under attack.	Identify developer



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Offline file saving	Major site content held offline in accessible format	Screen South/Accentuate UK
Monitoring use post-project	Continue to monitor who read the site through Google Analytics – assess if being used and – sometime after 2028 when its useful life is at an end.	Accentuate UK/Screen South
Social media	Make it clear post-project that the accounts are now dormant. However, retain passwords with Accentuate UK, to give the power to either eventually delete the account – or post occasional relevant material post-project	Accentuate UK/Screen South
Newsletter	Explain to newsletter subscribers that the project is now over and offer them the option of either withdrawing consent to be contacted, or becoming part of the Accentuate UK mailing list for contact about future projects relating to disability and culture.	Accentuate UK