Artcasting and ARTIST ROOMS on Tour: Using mobilities-informed methods to support new approaches to arts evaluation

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ABSTRACT

The artcasting project will develop, test and assess a new digital and mobile form of evaluation of arts-based engagement, in the context of ARTIST ROOMS On Tour exhibition. The goals of the project are to understand how mobilities approaches can enrich arts evaluation; to design, develop and pilot the artcasting platform; to generate a new approach to evaluation that can be built upon in the future; and to influence ARTIST ROOMS evaluation practice. This paper introduces artcasting, describes the conceptual foundations of the project, and outlines its contribution to the development of new conversations and innovative approaches to evaluating cultural heritage engagement.

Keywords

gallery engagement, digital education, mobilities, community, artcasting.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is hard to measure the most important things that educators and stakeholders want to know about the effectiveness of art-based learning and engagement. Engagement, inspiration and active learning are high priorities for museums and galleries, but methods for evaluating them are often constrained, lacking a sense of the richness of participants' experience. New approaches for evaluation of engagement are needed. In particular, more can be done to leverage the profound rethinking of place and space that has come along with digital incursions into our day-to-day lives. So the problem to be addressed in this research is that the significance of 'place' – imagined and real – is not being built upon to inform the evaluation of engagement with cultural heritage. A theoretical perspective drawing on mobilities theory, which focuses on tracing trajectories, networks, and the movement of people and objects, will be used to reimagine arts evaluation.

This project will develop, test and assess 'artcasting', a new digital and mobile form of evaluation of arts-based engagement, in the context of ARTIST ROOMS On Tour. ARTIST ROOMS is a collection of more than 725 works of international contemporary art acquired in 2008 by National Galleries of Scotland and Tate. It is being shared throughout the UK in a programme of exhibitions organised in collaboration with local associate galleries of all sizes. ARTIST ROOMS On Tour aims to ensure the collection engages new, young audiences, and this is mirrored in this project by a focus on young people (ages 13-25).

Artcasting involves the visitor in selecting an image of an artwork from a ROOM, and digitally 'casting' it outward to another location, where it can be received on mobile devices in the future. The artwork will be linked with a significant place in the mind of the visitor, evoking memories and emotions, and supporting lasting learning. In addition, through brief stories visitors record about their choice of location, artcasting shows how the impact of an exhibition may be extended imaginatively and literally through space and time. Artcasting simultaneously encourages visitors to make connections and reflect on what they have experienced, and captures those connections for sharing, analysis and evaluation. In this way, it challenges dominant approaches that separate engagement from evaluation. 'Artcasting' refers to casting's multiple meanings of projecting (broadcasting), fishing (casting a line), and selecting (casting a production).

The objectives of the project are to understand how mobilities approaches can enrich arts evaluation; to design, develop and pilot the artcasting platform; to generate a new approach to evaluation that can be built upon in the future; and to influence ARTIST ROOMS evaluation practice.

These objectives will be met through a three-stage research process involving qualitative methods and a design-based approach to generating, piloting and evaluating artcasting prototypes. Methods will include interviews, workshops with young visitors, iterative design of the artcasting application, in-gallery observations, and analysis of usage data and user-generated content shared by artcasting users.

This project is interdisciplinary, involving researchers from Digital Education and Design Informatics at the University of Edinburgh, and drawing in expertise from the National Galleries of Scotland and Tate, associate galleries and young people.

2. ARTS EVALUATION AND ARTIST ROOMS

ARTIST ROOMS associate galleries employ a range of approaches to engaging young people and new audiences with contemporary art. These approaches have included the establishment of young curators' groups, participation in local arts and community festivals, arts-based workshops and sessions, social networking outreach, partnerships with college and university art departments, and digital and mobile application development. Nonetheless, one key challenge faced by ARTIST ROOMS is to understand and evidence engagement's impact on individuals and communities, both at the time of the experience and in the longer term. More can be done to imagine and practice *evaluation* in museum and gallery contexts, leveraging the more profound rethinking of place and space that has come along with digital incursions into our day-to-day lives.

This challenge is shared by arts organisations of all kinds, as evaluation assumes a central role now in the funding and selection priorities of arts funding bodies. Museums and galleries are negotiating profound tensions around the meaning of evaluation:

"the problem of value for the [arts and] cultural sector is rooted in three issues: the meaning of the word 'culture', the tensions over making value judgements within the cultural sector and the difficulties of measurement within the cultural sector" (p.11) [1]. These problems are apparent in the broader literature in which notions of impact as either intrinsic or instrumental are contrasted [2] and value set out as either cultural or economic [3].

Current ARTIST ROOMS evaluation practice is based on the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs). In 2013, ARTIST ROOMS became the first visual arts project to pilot Arts Council England's Quality Principles for children and young people[1], with a view to using these Principles to inform a new evaluation framework. Three of these principles are of particular relevance to artcasting: active involvement, authenticity, and belonging and ownership. Active involvement is concerned with the development of skills and creativity through participation, direct collaboration, creative responses, or other interactions [4]. An authentic experience is 'real and meaningful', and includes 'excellent materials [and] outstanding works of art'. It engages young people in work which 'results in an authentic, meaningful product *experienced by others*' (p.10). Belonging and ownership is fostered through autonomy, decision-making and choice. Artcasting encourages creative responses, engages visitors with exceptional artworks, and engages young people in creating meaningful narratives of engagement. Making personal links between chosen artworks and places is an act of ownership, and these responses, narratives and links will be measurable and rich sites for evaluation of the Quality Principles in action.

The UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), with its Cultural Value Project, aims to move us beyond contrasting economic and cultural notions of value [1][5], and this project builds on this movement. Artcasting approaches the notion of value by looking at new and different ways of capturing and analysing engagement, developing innovative methods for evaluating participants' experience. It is designed to capture evaluation data robustly and creatively; and to provide means through which both aggregated and more detailed data, including the stories of young visitors, can be generated and used. Looking ahead, a recent ARTIST ROOMS evaluation review [6] asks: "how should the arts sector be evidencing their work with young people to funders including foundations, local authorities and arts funders?" (p.31). This project aims to demonstrate that innovations in arts evaluation are possible and desirable, and to support broader conversations about evidence, value and the arts, drawing on a mobilities-based conceptual framework.

3. A MOBILITIES APPROACH TO EVALUATING ENGAGEMENT

Artcasting will explore how a mobilities perspective can provide new insights into and strategies for museum and gallery evaluation. Mobilities perspectives have been increasingly adopted in the social sciences in recent years, because they offer new ways of understanding social phenomena [7]. Instead of trying to understand people, objects, and relationships as they appear within a bounded setting (a classroom, a city, a museum), a mobilities framework traces trajectories and networks, the constant movement of people and objects. Artcasting will research cultural heritage evaluation in a new way, using ARTIST

ROOMS' distinctiveness to understand museum and gallery learning from a theoretical perspective that takes into account social, spatial and technological mobilities.

ARTIST ROOMS provide a compelling context in which to explore the use of a mobilities framework for museum and gallery evaluation. The exhibition puts internationally important contemporary artworks in many locations that do not routinely have access to such works and puts the task of making them relevant in the hands of local galleries and users. ROOMS are in tension between *stability*, expressed through the focus on an individual artist, and *movement*, expressed through the touring model on which the exhibition is built – with ever-changing locations and character. Each ROOM is therefore an example of how della Dorra [8] describes travelling sacred objects: as things that 'destabilize the idea of sacred space as a "fixed" monolithic entity, calling for new, dynamic and more fluid approaches' (p.227). Travelling ROOMS shift the idea of *art* space, as they are put into dialogue with new gallery spaces, localities, communities and permanent collections.

Cultural heritage educators have long sought 'nomadic resources' [9] which can move through gallery spaces with visitors and prompt them to 'experiment further in the real setting rather than providing an escape from that setting' (p.309); and 'seamless visits' which bridge locations and times (ibid). The proliferation of 'always-on, always-on-you' [10] mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets hold out the promise of richer in-gallery engagements, and more effective links between home, school, gallery and public space. Some recent projects have sought to leverage these technologies and their potential to blur the lines between spaces and encourage what might be termed 'visitor voice' (see for example the QRator[2] project).

In addition to using digital technologies to foster engagement with material spaces and objects, digital *objects* have been theorised as being more open than their material, gallery-based counterparts to being "re-claimed, re-contextualised and re-formed into personally meaningful… configurations" [11]. The availability of the digital object to be so reclaimed produces opportunities for learning and engagement but also introduces tensions for cultural heritage organisations around issues of interpretation, ownership and participation. In an emerging "post-digital" world [12][13] where the digital, and digital ways of participating, are increasingly a part of everyday life and experiences, these tensions are put into new perspective. Where museums and galleries use and work with them as powerful objects in their own right, the impact of digital artefacts and their mobilities can be striking. For example, ARtours in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum explored possible responses to the openness of the digital object, in particular its mobility, which at the time (2009) echoed the mobility of the museum's collections, which were 'for years homeless due to a renovation of its original premises and the construction of a new wing' [14]. The material collection had been 'drifting from one location to another in the city of Amsterdam. The new dialogues this generated with the urban realm, the people in the street and various Amsterdam cultural institutions proved to be very powerful and inspiring' (ibid). The project in response developed an 'augmented reality' lending library of images, which could then be 'hung' in an immediate location of the borrower's choosing and viewed by others through their smartphones. Museum and gallery projects working with digital objects and place have aimed to increase and extend

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[1] http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/our-priorities-2011-15/children-and-young-people/quality/

[2] http://www.qrator.org

engagement (see Tate's ArtMaps project, for example[3]): artcasting goes further and seeks to connect engagement and evaluation within a single intervention.

4. EXPLORING ARTCASTING

We will use artcasting to answer the questions:

- How does offering visitors a way to align their impressions of the ROOM with specific places help them articulate their engagement with the work?

- How can a mobilities approach which asks visitors to make connections between art and place constitute meaningful evaluation practice?

While still in the early development stages, the intention of artcasting is to prompt visitors to make a connection between a work of art they have just seen and a place where they would like to see it again. By adding a short narrative to a 'pin' on a digital map, a visitor can express something of the nature of their engagement with the artwork, perhaps discovering more about their experience of it in the process, and generating a richer picture of this engagement than can be achieved through a more conventional visitor survey. Arts evaluation measures tend to be instrumental (ignoring many important, if elusive, notions of value) or anecdotal (for example, using selected participant quotes) [15][1]. Furthermore, if artcasting persists on the devices of visitors after they leave the gallery, the opportunity to encounter and respond to this, or other, artworks again, at a later time and in another place, opens up the possibility of an unfolding narrative of engagement that goes beyond the original and individual moment of encounter. By capturing, aggregating and visualising multiple visitors' points of engagement with the artworks in a ROOM, galleries can come to better understand and communicate the impact their exhibitions are having, and why. Artcasting can in itself be a form of engagement, moving towards a designerly approach to evaluation which privileges making and doing as a way of generating meaningful data.
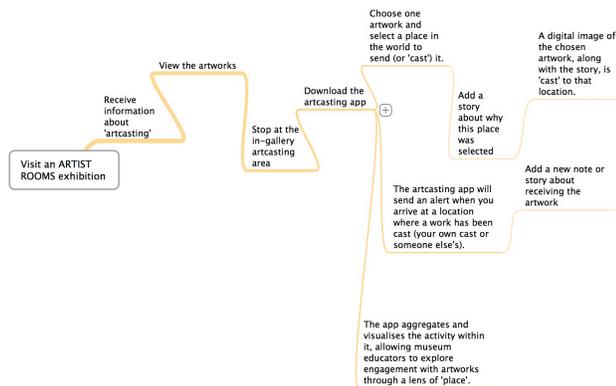

Fig 1: How artcasting might work

5. GALLERY EDUCATION COMMUNITIES AND ARTCASTING

A significant feature of this project is its genesis in collaborations between the University of Edinburgh, Tate, National Galleries of Scotland, and the gallery learning and engagement organisation ENGAGE, through the ARTIST ROOMS Research Partnership (ARRP)[4]. The ARRP has worked together since 2011 to generate scholarly research activity within the context of ARTIST ROOMS, including strands on art and its histories, engagement and learning, and the material collection. An overarching theme of 'access and digital media' informs cross-cutting dialogue and discussion. The artcasting project, along with the Warhol MOOC[5], are two key outputs involving the learning and engagement strand.

The significance of the ARRP for the artcasting project is that it created, from the outset, an opportunity to engage with matters of concern for ARTIST ROOMS and the seventy-plus associate galleries so far involved in exhibiting it. The structure of the project itself involves frequent collaborations with this, and the wider cultural heritage education community, through a series of Twitter chats, digital exchanges, associate events, and a 'hack day'. The objectives of the project go beyond designing and testing a single intervention: they will use the artcasting intervention as an object to think and learn with, and to invite new understandings of and further dialogue about intersections of engagement, technology, and evaluation.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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