Case Study - Inside the Irish Giant: History, Science and Art

On: Public Engagement: merging the arts with academia.

Purpose: Highlight the breadth and creativity that public engagement can bring to the research agenda.

Funded by: Centre for the History of Medicine's Wellcome Trust Strategic Award (Situating Medicine: New Directions in the History of Medicine)

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This case study looks at one project as an example of how a Research Centre can work creatively to meet its research agenda. The Centre for the History of Medicine, established at Warwick in 1999, seeks to understand medical ideas, practices and institutions in their broad social and cultural contexts. With a strong commitment to interdisciplinary debate, the Centre utilises and develops intellectual tools to engage with the many challenges faced by medicine both historically and in contemporary society. As a result, an important and continuing focus of the Centre is engaging the local community and the public at large with the history of medicine as a discipline relevant to contemporary concerns.

Inside the Irish Giant: History, Science and Art is an example of how the Centre has imaginatively taken research into the wider public arena. Conceived by Dr Claudia Stein (then Centre Director), the project focused on a two day public engagement event combining Cartoon de Salvo's theatrical production, 'The Irish Giant', with expert panel discussions exploring two significant themes from the piece. The themes are intrinsically linked to Claudia's research on Medicine and Science in the Enlightenment, with more specific inspiration resulting from a viewing of Cartoon de Salvo's 'Irish Giant' at Battersea Arts Centre in January 2011 and Ronan McCloskey's BBC production of the same name about Brendan Holland and his ancestor, the original Irish Giant, Charles Byrne. The production of a 'work in progress', performed by Cartoon de Salvo at the Capital Centre Studio on 27th and 28th May 2011 were followed by two panel discussions involving Brendan Holland, Ronan McCloskey and Alex Murdoch and Brian Logan from Cartoon de Salvo, as well as expert academics – Professor Márta Korbonits, Dr Carole Reeves, Professor Steve Fuller and Dr Claudia Stein.

Part of the Wellcome Trust's Strategic Award to the Centre is to create innovative public engagement and outreach activities. The Irish Giant piece certainly achieved this, bringing together a theatrical work in progress and funding its development, whilst based on a rigorous research agenda. The public were able to experience this theatrical event unfolding and be involved in academic discourse. The profile of the Centre, its funders, the History Department, the University and external collaborative partners were all recognised in event publicity, which has had notable impact. Feedback from the audience showed measurable success not only in the response to this piece but also in promoting interest in future public engagement events and the work of the Centre. Specially designed webpages have left a legacy which continues to be viewed and promotes the work and funding of the Wellcome Trust.

In this project and its wider activities in public engagement, the Centre's Administrator, Tracy Horton, has learned some valuable lessons on undertaking this kind of work. Tracy has presented her perspective on how to plan public engagement activity at the university (a powerpoint presentation is available, see link at end of case study) but the main points are outlined below:

1. Budget! The size of the activity, scope and number of collaborators, and details of any events must all be linked to available funding in advance. Don't rely on money being 'made available' further down the line.

2. Link the public engagement activity closely to the research for maximum impact. A web-based database may not seem as exciting as a theatre piece, exhibition or poetry workshop, but it may be the best way of promoting, developing and sharing the fundamental research at the core of the project.

3. Location and timing of events. Involving Warwick Arts Centre, for example, and any number of external collaborators will need careful scheduling and long-term advance booking.

4. Marketing and advertising needs to be considered in advance. If numbers for an event are limited it may be best to just advertise locally. If the event is large-scale, consider marketing through a production company (if one is involved) or ask for assistance from Warwick Comms office.

5. Make the event as engaging as possible whilst it is being staged at Warwick. For The Irish Giant a display was mounted in the Capital Centre, including an eight-foot skeleton poster: even those not attending measured themselves against the giant!

The whole event was organised and staged within four months through necessity, and this is probably the only thing the Centre would change. It didn't allow for further funding applications and the first choice venue (Warwick Arts Centre) was not available. However, the overall success of the event can be measured in the mutually beneficial collaborations with external organisations as well as its level of public engagement. China Plate Theatre, working with the Arts Centre, commissioned and contracted the work of Cartoon de Salvo to further their work in arts and academia. The theatre company themselves were able to develop their work in progress but were valuable to the Centre in discussions with BBC producers, the Giant's descendant and doctors. The showcase website was the first that 4th Wall Media had designed for the Centre, expanding its relationship with the university.

All in all, the project shows how research, public engagement and collaboration with a range of external organisations can produce an event of great impact, innovation and creativity.

Further details can be found on the Centre's website at:

www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/chm/outreach/irish_giant#/page/1

Powerpoint document:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/ldc/researchers/eande/casestudies/presentation_public_engagement.ppt