

BRITISH MUSEUM: THE TALKING OBJECTS MODEL

Date	2013
Region	National
Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd role	We evaluated Talking Objects from 2000 to 2013.
Methodology	Surveys of young people, museums, artists, facilitators and curators, and analysis of conference feedback forms.

INTRODUCTION

The British Museum developed Talking Objects in 2008 with young people as participants. In 2011-2013 British Museum worked with five museums (Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery in Carlisle, Tyne and Wear Art Gallery and Museum, Newark and Sherwood Museum Service, Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service, Brighton Museum and Art and Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery) to adapt the model to different contexts.

Talking Objects is specific model designed to develop an intensive dialogue between museum curators and a small group of target visitors, using artists as enablers, inspirers and documenters. Talking Objects takes an object-based approach designed to deepen audience members' engagement with collections and show museum staff the value of audience members giving a new interpretation to objects. Talking Objects is a deliberate act of organisational development: it seeks to create peak experiences that motivate curators and audience members to sustain their engagement.

THE INGREDIENTS

The ingredients are:

- **An object.** A good Talking Objects object is one that tells a story. There should be enough information to tell a story and raise questions about the object.

"No objects are bad objects. Talking Objects should be about working with as many objects as possible, you just have to work harder with some objects than others." Emma Poulter, British Museum

- **A curator.** Ideally the curator should have specialist knowledge of the object. The curator needs to be present for the whole project.
- **Senior members of the museum.** These should be invited to the final day so that they can interact with the participants. This element gives the project impact and sustainability.
- **10 or so members of a target audience group.** It is important that the group attend each day of the project. It is easier to work with existing groups, where the group leader has the role of coordinating the group's visit to the Museum.
- **A creative facilitator.** The British Museum has worked with dance, drama, music production, and digital media practitioners: the common link is passion and skill. Creative facilitators need experience of working with, and engaging, the participant group. A bonus is if they have some link with the museum. For example one of the Talking Objects facilitators had helped carry out some of the reconstruction work at the museum. It is generally better to have one creative facilitator who attends

the whole project. Having two creative facilitators running different parts of the project can mean that the process gets fragmented and loses its depth.

- **A film maker.** The British Museum uses the same film maker for each Talking Objects project, who has been responsible filming and editing. In one project the participants helped with the editing, which also worked well.
- **A photographer** (optional) can help document the project by taking photographs on sample days e.g. days one and four.
- **Volunteers.** These can help set up the room, and also give out and collect evaluation forms.

WHAT IS THE TALKING OBJECTS METHOD?

The structure of Talking Objects is:

ELEMENT	TIMING	PURPOSE
Taster session 1, typically takes place 2-4 weeks before the main project starts	1-2hrs	To engage participants on their own premises
Taster session 2, typically takes place 1-2 weeks before the main project starts	1-2hrs	To get participants used to travelling to the museum and introduce them to the curator
Onsite- main project	Four days typically 12-4 or 5pm but other times can work. This can be over four consecutive days, two days one week, two days the next, or one day a week. The latter can be easier to schedule but might give a less intense experience. This could be countered by engaging participants between sessions e.g. digitally.	To create high quality art work. To create a non-hierarchical dialogue between museum staff and participants. To create a record of the project as a resource for other museums.

EVALUATION

The Esme Fairbairn Foundation funded an extension of Talking Objects which found that:

- Spreading the project over a longer period of time gave more time to change the project in response to feedback from participants.
- Locating the project in different venues gave historical background and a richness of experience for participants.
- Rather than being separate people, the roles of organiser, facilitator and curator could be shared across a team.
- Working with young people who are not disengaged is also worthwhile. It helped to develop a youth panel and encouraging interest in museums as a possible job.

- Instead of freelance artists, arts organisations can be employed as facilitators. This can give access to additional resources such as space and equipment.
- Giving participants the option of working towards an Arts Award can be beneficial for the participants but requires another day in addition to the standard model.

These comments show how the model can be adapted to different contexts.