Leave Your Mark: The Visual Libraries Project – a collaborative visual project that examines the creative use of sketchbooks in public libraries.

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This article will outline how a new research project is providing access to sketchbooks and how these can be used to support, promote and encourage diversity and democracy in the public library. It aims to explore how sketchbooks can empower people to re-discover their creative potential and examine ways to collaborate with library groups that cover a variety of backgrounds and minority groups. It will describe the establishment of *The Visual Libraries Project* and its vision for the future through expansion. It will conclude with some recommendations for other libraries interested in collaboration, on the implementation and the possibilities for visual archiving of the sketchbooks.

Background and rationale

There is currently an increased understanding of the importance of sketchbooks to provide a space which can be used to develop creative and critical thinking skills. This is evidenced through projects such as *Sketchbooks in Schools* (www.accessart.org.uk/sketchbook) and *1001 Journals* (http://1001journals.com), as well as through books written around the subject, websites for schools on how best to integrate sketchbooks into the curriculum, blogs and forums discussing their strengths, and online galleries and shared web spaces enabling all interested parties to generate and co-create a shared platform for learning.

Sketchbooks offer great potential as a medium of expression for all, by means of drawing, note-taking, collecting, and so on. Children do not question that they can be creative, but as we grow older, our confidence in expressing ourselves through writing texts or making objects and images recedes. As lecturers in the Schools of Art, Design and Media and Creative Technology at the University of Portsmouth, we promote the importance of sketchbooks as a visually creative

way for individuals to express ideas, communicate concepts, provide a space and opportunity to question, reflect and analyse their own work and thoughts, and express their individual voice.

Following positive feedback from the Portsmouth Library Service staff, we felt that there could be real benefits from offering these opportunities to a much wider audience, allowing a greater number and variety of participants to experience creativity and interactivity and to view others' ideas. Introducing the sketchbook to library users as an experimental vehicle for the individual seemed the way to help people to regain confidence in creativity. The partnership between Portsmouth Library Service and the University of Portsmouth would be vitally important to making this project a success, using expertise from both institutions to organise planned events in the library and thus allowing the project to reach various groups across the spectrum of the community.

Historically, libraries have not been places where people were encouraged to write or draw in books, for good reasons. We were aware that to promote this project to the public we needed the library staff to embrace the project and have a feeling of ownership. We felt that it was important for library staff and our students to involve themselves through workshops, allowing them to encourage and engage with the public. Technology provides a way to store, develop and showcase this work, with the internet used as a rich resource to inform, educate and entertain, and specifically to allow the books to be promoted.

The knowledge and techniques required for the construction of an online depository emerged from two concurrent research projects using new initiatives in visualisation and content management strategies for web-based interactive environments. *ImageXchange* (www.envf.port.ac.uk/illustration/IMAGES/index.htm) is a collaborative research environment linking international cross-cultural educational projects in image-

based communication. *The Ministry of Books*
(www.envf.port.ac.uk/illustration/minweb/recept/recep.htm) is an online
knowledgebase supporting the research and production of artists' books.

Aims of the project

The project sought to:

- Develop strong links with the library service and the community in Portsmouth, promoting a greater awareness of the importance of the library and its support services through a positive experience;
- Empower community and minority groups to engage with the University and local libraries in a new and innovative way;
- Promote a greater social awareness among students, allowing them to utilise their talent and skills for the benefit of the city and its community through engagement with organised workshops;
- Empower local residents and the student population to contribute to a collaborative creative project;
- Increase use of libraries by engaging new library members, including those who haven't used a library in traditional ways;
- Encourage and develop a more pro-active relationship between the library service and service users;
- Support the development of cultural activity and self-expression;
- Celebrate the Visual Journal creativity in library buildings and products;
- Establish a database that will support and promote the importance of sketchbooks in libraries nationally and internationally, in order to foster cross-cultural developments and projects. The aim was to promote this project not as an exclusive resource, but with the intention of sharing, networking and interweaving with others.

Organisation and structure

The project began with meetings and workshops involving library staff members who would be responsible for disseminating the concept. These allowed us to personally introduce the project, discuss and evaluate a number of issues and

gather feedback. We introduced the staff members to some visual diaries produced by students and asked for their ideas for possible themes, and then asked them to use a sketchbook. The workshops enabled library staff to engage more fully with the project, experiencing how it feels to produce creative ideas to a theme, which it was hoped would encourage them to promote the initiative to library users.

Initial responses to the sketchbooks were cautious and to some extent sceptical, with an immediate divide into the 'arty', who were keen to give it a go, and the 'non-arty', who were reluctant to engage and showed less optimism about the potential of the project. The group who defined themselves as non-arty ("I was hopeless at art at school and haven't touched it since") were supported to have a go with the reassurance that the project was about leaving your mark, having an input through a piece of writing, a collection of objects, sewing or knitting, lists or even a collection of ephemera. An empty diary was a daunting prospect, so 'fear of white space and empty pages' was overcome by students and staff members from the School of Art filling the first few pages when running workshops in the library. In the future it may be possible to use existing contributors to 'make the first marks'. Reflection reveals that staff members who had the opportunity to attend a workshop, however they initially defined their own skills, were more likely to continue to contribute personally and be more effective advocates for the project.

During initial consultation with library staff members, it was decided that a thematic approach would support the users and provide a concept for people to react to creatively. It has become clear that the themes for the sketchbooks are a major factor in encouraging participation in the project and some themes have proved more popular than others. Selecting the themes helps to give contributors a sense of ownership and should be part of any introductory workshop for a new set of contributors or potential contributors. Theme suggestions included: A good night/day out; My library; Disability; Portsmouth; My city; Age; My family;

Memories; I am beautiful; Visions of the future; Obsessions; Tomorrow; My mode of transport; Senses; My day; When I open my eyes; I dream; On the seashore.

Our project suggested that the thematic route was a successful model that we would wish to pursue in the future. However, the Visual Diary format has the potential to be used as a tool for eliciting feedback in an informal and non-directed way. It could be used to evaluate *The Visual Libraries Project* by providing a sketchbook in which individuals could give their views on the project in words, sketches or using a choice of medium, providing a more engaging and open-ended opportunity that could succeed where formal survey or evaluation can fail.

Library systems and resources

The 'Visual Diaries' are made available to all categories of library user, including those who have a temporary ticket and can only borrow two items. A Visual Diary simply counts as a single book loan and can be borrowed for up to 4 weeks and renewed for a further period, like any other library item.The sketchbooks were put into stock so they could be viewed, accessed and reserved through the library catalogue. The books are serviced as loan items and presented to the public on display stands with posters and handouts to explain the project.

We believe the absence of separate rules for this scheme contributed to its success. There was nothing new any current library member had to do, simply borrow a 'Visual Diary' along with their reading books and any other loan items. The libraries in Portsmouth differ in size and as the project develops, this will inform where it is practical to deliver workshops and have space to display in a significant way, including providing facilities for individuals to 'leave their mark' in the library. It may be possible to utilise closed days for targeted work in the future.

Promotion and dissemination

Currently the project has progressed through low-key promotion, i.e. posters, leaflets and a limited number of workshops aimed at targeted groups. Direct engagement through participation in a workshop seems the most productive but most staff-intensive method. However, we have reached a point where word of mouth is starting to have an influence, to the point where individuals from other libraries have heard about the project and are requesting 'Visual Journals' for their library.

We have secured the www.visuallibraries.com domain name and are using www.flickr.com/groups/visuallibraries/ to aggregate visual work produced in the journals. Design and production has begun, with the need for continual upkeep of the sites.

Current status of the project
From April to August 2009 we have recorded 122 issues for the 30 diaries that are on the system, which excludes those used through the Community Library Services. Issue figures decreased in August, suggesting a need to promote this scheme again. While sketchbooks were limited in number it seemed sensible not to consider more prominent promotion.

The development of the project to date clearly illustrates its potential to engage individuals and communities and to facilitate creative, personal and cultural contributions from a very wide range of ages, abilities and cultures. Reflection has shown that collaboration between the library service and a university-developed project can, if extended, provide access for a wide range of hard-to-reach groups in all geographical locations across the city. The strength of this project lies in the collaborative partnership between Portsmouth City Council and the Creative and Cultural Industries Faculty at the University of Portsmouth, and using expertise from both institutions will allow this project to grow.

Conclusion and future plans
There is a passionate commitment to extending this project to make it as

inclusive as possible. Funding from a number of sources will enable this to happen, through:

- The delivery of workshops to five community groups, the vision impaired, prison services, MIND, housebound people and the women's refuge;
- The addition of another 250 sketchbooks;
- Collaboration with local schools and community centres to extend the project.

This funding will also enable a greater number of people in the community to become aware of the opportunities offered by the project, through better promotion. The project will be promoted via bookmarks, posters, the Big Screen Portsmouth and an AccessArt web link to a page entitled *Sketchbook Space*, aimed at informal adult learners.

Funding has been approved to facilitate international links with the British Council Library in India, the Little Flower Convent for the Blind in Chennai, India, the Art House Co-op in Atlanta, Georgia, US, and the Forsyth County Public Library in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, who are already using our model. Work already created by the project will be celebrated in a range of ways, including lectures, exhibitions, new publicity material and the creation of a documentary film with the aid of a BBC cameraman. In addition, the design, navigation and curation of the website will be improved.

We aim to link all the innovative work done in Portsmouth to our international partners and vice versa. A dedicated website will be created, building on our current Flickr group, to bring relationships closer. In addition, a touring exhibition of sketchbooks from libraries in Portsmouth, India and the US is planned for the future.

The project now needs to build on this clearly successful initial stage to demonstrate that it can work positively and creatively with a range of groups,

including children, young adults, people with physical and learning disabilities, the housebound, and prisoners. From a library perspective, an aspiration for the future is that the project promotes the use of libraries among individuals who wouldn't see themselves as traditional library users, and encourages users of libraries to be more
pro-active and less passive. This is also in line with a major move towards increased community engagement and interaction through the university. This project offers a real opportunity to engage a wide range of groups with cultural and creative activity and its success can be used as a model to extend this to new audiences nationally and internationally in 2010.

All websites accessed 24 January 2010.

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