

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Reading		
Unit of Assessment: 32 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: purpleSTARS: Changing the lives of adults with learning disabilities using sensory art and technology in museums and at heritage sites		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2008 – 2020.		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Kate Allen	Associate Professor of Art	2003 – present.
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020.		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Museums and heritage sites can be inaccessible for adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) with the main focus being directed at engaging children with LDD. Kate Allen's research and her work with the purpleSTARS team has brought fresh insights which challenge the sector's approach to inclusivity for adults by taking engagement beyond passive consumption. It uses participatory and creative ways to engage adults with LDD, museum staff and contractors. By reviewing collections and curatorial approaches the approach provides adults with LDD the opportunity to act as co-researchers and co-designers. This empowers adults with LLD and enables museums and heritage sites to re-think how they approach their collections.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Allen's research interests in the field of museum access developed through her participation in the Access to Heritage Project (2008-9), commissioned by Liverpool Mencap, when she worked with local artists to produce a sensory trail at Speke Hall. In 2012, building on this research, Allen received AHRC funding for "Interactive multisensory objects developed for and by people with learning disabilities" (2012-15). This initiative is a unique collaboration between Allen, Liverpool Mencap Access to Heritage Forum, the former School of Systems Engineering at the University of Reading and RIX Research & Media at the University of East London. The "Sensory Objects" project created a series of interactive, multisensory objects that replicated or responded to artworks or other objects of cultural significance in local and national collections at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), Reading and the British Museum, London (BM). The project worked with people with LDD as co-researchers, experts and consultants in their disability, engaging them in a process of generating and designing sensory objects to address Allen's research questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How will inclusive research methods influence the ideas and development of interactive, multisensory artworks? 2. Could these experiments influence the provision of multisensory objects and interactive technologies in museums and heritage sites for the general public? <p>Research from Sensory Objects has included exhibitions, events and peer-reviewed journal articles, raising awareness for all stakeholders (including curators, designers and academics), to catalyse and stimulate the changes that are required to make exhibits truly inclusive. The practical methods include developing inclusive electronics and sensory labels and the work demonstrates that developing sensory experiences helps include a more diverse range of people in different ways that can complement each other and combine to achieve more welcoming and inclusive museums (outputs 1-6).</p>		

Allen's research has disrupted the established understanding of inclusive design as a set of "adjustments" which usually include making cosmetic changes to displays for people with LDD. In its place, Allen has devised a model of inclusivity which is achieved through involving people with LDD in the decision-making processes (outputs 1, 2 and 5). This methodology interprets "public ownership" of museums in a new and challenging way and has been achieved by actively engaging people with LDD as researchers, curators and creative producers – a method which exemplifies the definition of "inclusive research" (output 2).

Relationships with the BM and RIX have flourished since the Sensory Objects research project began. These relationships formed the core of the AHRC Follow-On Fund for Impact and Engagement enterprise which established [purpleSTARS](#). purpleSTARS is a collective which creates opportunities for artists and technologists (with and without LLD) to work in collaboration with museums, galleries and heritage sites to develop more inclusive, interactive experiences.

3. References to the research

The research meets or exceeds the threshold for 2* originality, significance and rigour. It resulted from competitive, peer-reviewed funding applications and was published in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes and presented in exhibitions and events. Its innovative focus on the experiences of adults with LLD has influenced new thinking and policy in museums and at heritage sites.

1. Allen, K., Hollinworth, N., Hwang, F., Minnion, A. and Kwiatkowska, G. (2016). *Interactive sensory objects for and by people with learning disabilities*. The International Journal of the Interactive Museum, 9 (1), pp. 21-38. CentAUR ID: <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/56333/>
2. Allen, K., Hollinworth, N., Hwang, F. and Minnion, A. (2015). *Sensory objects at the British Museum* [show/exhibition]. CentAUR ID: <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/54539/>
3. Allen, K., Hollinworth, N., Hwang, F. and Minnion, A. (2015). *Sensory objects: a case study*. Disability Cooperative Network. CentAUR ID: <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/54547/>
4. Hollinworth, N., Allen, K., Kwiatkowska, G., Minnion, A. and Hwang, F. (2014). *littleBits go LARGE: making electronics more accessible to people with learning disabilities*. ASSETS 14 Proceedings on the 16th international ACM SIGACCESS conference on Computers & accessibility, pp. 305-306. ISBN: 9781450327206 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2661334.2661341>
5. Hollinworth, N., Allen, K., Kwiatkowska, G., Minnion, A., and Hwang, F. (2014). *Interactive sensory objects for and by people with learning disabilities*. ACM SIGACCESS Accessibility and Computing (109), pp. 11-20. ISSN 1558-2337 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2637487.2637489>
6. Allen, K. and Minnion, A. (2020) *purpleSTARS – inclusive curation and production creates inclusive museums*. In: *Inclusive Digital Interactives: Best Practices, Innovative Experiments and Questions for Research*. Smithsonian. ISBN: 978-0-97-08358-8-8 CentAUR ID: <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86910/>

4. Details of the impact

To address the issue of the museum and heritage sector's lack of engagement with adults who have LDD, Allen's research has engaged these individuals as co-researchers and co-producers. These collaborations have encouraged adults with LDD to make sense of objects in museum collections and broaden their appreciation and understanding of heritage collections. In turn, the museum and heritage sector is reconsidering and challenging its previous methods of engaging with adults with LLD and altering its public programming and employment opportunities for adults with LDD as a result.

A. Impact on institutional planning for accessibility and public programming

The purpleSTARS team has provided consultancy for several international, national and local museums and heritage sites, including TOHU Canada, the BM, the Museum of London (MoL), the Ragged School Museum (London), Glenside Hospital Museum (Bristol), Tate Gallery

(London) and the MERL. Their consultancy work has focused on making collections at these institutions accessible and inclusive for adults with LDD (E1).

i) Accessibility of museums

Consultation with members of purpleSTARS in 2018 assisted the The Ragged School Museum and the MoL in their plans for making their sites accessible. The purpleSTARS team did a sensory expedition at the Ragged School Museum and resulting suggestions were incorporated into the National Lottery Heritage Fund bid. They also presented at MoL's "New Museum Conversation" where their suggestions were well-received; the last consultancy workshop with the purpleSTARS team for the MoL's new inclusive gallery was scheduled for 30 March 2020, but has been postponed due to Covid-19. The purpleSTARS team are now working with MoL on their "Listening to London" project, developing new ways to access the MoL's oral history collections (E2).

ii) Review of collections and curatorial approaches by museums

In 2015, the purpleSTARS team launched a series of sensory labels at the BM's Enlightenment Gallery and since then, the group has been invited back several times to help inform the institution's public programming. For example, members of purpleSTARS joined the BM's Wolfson Advisory Panel and contributed to developing activities for #PurpleLightUp, a global movement designed to draw attention to the economic empowerment of disabled people (December 2018). As part of #PurpleLightUp, they demonstrated the sensory labels they had created for the Enlightenment Gallery and contributed to a story-telling session in the Islamic Gallery which engaged 197 visitors (E3).



In 2018 members of purpleSTARS gave the first ever Tate 10-Minute Talk in a paying exhibition and due to its success, the Tate Exchange Team asked them to present again in 2019. In 2020 the purpleSTARS team collaborated with the inclusive nightclub Bubbleclub to develop a very successful event for Uniqlo Tate Late which had 1,581 visitors (E4). Prior to the event members of purpleSTARS developed and facilitated an inclusive training day for Tate Modern staff (curators, visitor assistants, security, hospitality staff) which focused on the principles of TALK (Talk, Ask, Look/Listen, Keep Trying) when interacting with adults with LDD (E4).

The purpleSTARS team has also impacted on public programming at local museums. For example, sensory objects were instrumental in Hackney Museum's exhibition "Mad House/My House" (2 February – 20 May 2017) which put disability at the centre of its programme. For this exhibition, members of purpleSTARS developed sensory objects in response to Hackney Museum's collections on how local people with LDD have been treated historically. This exhibition paved the way for the purpleSTARS team to work on a second exhibition "Roots, Rhythms and Records" at Hackney Museum (2 October – 16th March 2019) which highlighted disability. The purpleSTARS team has helped change the type of exhibitions and public

programming that Hackney Museum are planning for the future. Josie Stevens, Heritage Learning Manager for Hackney Museum commented: “it shows that we’re an open, forward thinking museum that will do things a bit differently and challenge other museums to do similar things” (E5).

B. Socio-economic impact

i) Museum and heritage organisation volunteer and work placement

Allen’s research has changed the way that heritage organisations train their staff to engage with people with LDD, including through offering volunteer and work placement schemes. As a pilot study in 2017, two members of purpleSTARS and students at Reading College were selected to undertake a volunteer placement at the MERL in Reading to explore how the museum could engage with people with LDD. As a result, a regular internship for students with LDD at Reading College was developed and two further students have completed this internship to date. The opportunities that the purpleSTARS team gave to students at Reading College contributed to the college’s classification as “Outstanding” by Ofsted (E6).



The purpleSTARS placement programme has positively affected attitudes toward involving and employing people with LDD in the heritage sector; staff from Reading College commented: “the scope and ambition of purpleSTARS is amazing because museums always seemed so inaccessible [...]. It is nice to actually see people with learning difficulties in an employment environment and see how they are helping others” (E6.) The purpleSTARS model has proven so successful in this field that it is now being adopted by the Wager Centre in Montréal, Canada, where a new group “Fabulous Stars” has been established (E7).

ii) Employment opportunities for people with LDD

In partnership with JET, members of purpleSTARS have been able to take up supported work placements in the heritage sector. Under this scheme, one purpleSTARS member worked one day a week at Hackney Museum on the front-desk as an employee funded by JET (March 2019 - March 2020). The Heritage Learning Managers noted that the purpleSTAR’s member’s presence, confidence and work ethic helped train front-desk staff in working with people with LDD. The opportunity enabled museum staff to engage with the local LDD community in sensory activities, prompting further training and experience in methods of engagement which have been disseminated throughout the museum (E5). Members of purpleSTARS have not only helped to make museum collections more accessible; their involvement has provided them with valuable work experience and in some cases paid employment and financial independence (E8).

The purpleSTARS enterprise has shown that working with adults with LDD as co-researchers and co-creators can encourage them to make sense of objects in museums and enable museums and heritage sites to make their collections accessible and engaging to a wider public (E9, E10). This work has already influenced some museums to adopt different approaches to

exhibitions to engage adults with LDD (E1). The positive responses from the public to these new interactive and multisensory objects highlight how valuable these methods are to heritage organisations striving to expand their reach and engagement. Allen's research is now being used to establish a set of best practice working principles for the sector (E10).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [E1] purpleSTARS accessible website featuring case studies and videos from the various project collaborations with museums and heritage partners <https://purplestars.org.uk/> (PDF also provided).
- [E2] Testimonial from Head of Engagement at MoL
- [E3] British Museum documentation - social media and emails.
- [E4] Feedback from 2018 pop-up museum at the Tate Modern <https://vimeo.com/253141860> and PDF file
- [E5] Transcript of interview with Hackney Museum and social media.
- [E6] Ofsted 'outstanding' result for Reading College LLD/D and comment from Reading College LLD/D staff(2017) <https://www.activatelearning.ac.uk/about-us/performance/ofsted> (also provided as PDF file).
- [E7] Documentation for establishment of 'Fabulous Stars' at the Wager Centre in Montréal, Canada.
- [E8] Interview with purpleSTARS member.
- [E9] Annie Grant, 'Please Do Touch', *Special Children Magazine*, vol. 224, pp. 20-22. <https://purplestarsorguk.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/sc-244-please-do-touch-2.pdf> (also provided as PDF file)
- [E10] Winner of International Design for All Foundation award in 2014 and 2015. <http://designforall.org/winners.php> (also provided as PDF file).