A Pitt Rivers Disability Trail Project

Introduction

Hello, I’m Miranda, and as has been said I am the current President, or Chair, of the Oxford Students’ Disability Community, which is both a society and Student Union campaign. We host accessible socials every week during term time, and are hoping to invite the Staff Disability Network along to our 6th week social. We also have a relatively large online presence, so if you would like to learn more about OSDC, you can find us at oxfordsu.org, on Facebook, Twitter, or you can email us at oxdisability@oxfordsu.ox.ac.uk.

Before I start, I’d like to note that I will be making the full transcript of my talk available online as well as the slides I use today.

So I’m here to introduce a disability trail project I’ve been working on here at the Pitt Rivers Museum. Now, you may be thinking ‘Hang on. This is World Mental Health Day, why am I talking about disability?’

Well, I define disability as an umbrella term to refer to conditions which include mental health conditions, specific learning difficulties, chronic illness, physical impairments, sensory impairments and lots and lots of other things. The same applies for the Disability Advisory Service at the University, the Staff Disability Network, and Disabled Students Allowance, among many other organisations and policies and other things which have disability in their title.

So why do we do this? Well, for a start, mental health simply meets the definition of a disability under the 2010 Equality Act: that being, it is a long term physical or mental impairment with a substantial adverse effect on one’s ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. For too long, in recent years, mental health and other conditions have been divided, separated, and, especially within social media, pitted against one another. But the truth is that invisible disabilities such as chronic illness often have a huge amount of overlap with mental health when it comes to societal attitudes, and there are many conditions which have overlaps in access needs. It’s simply mutually beneficial to include mental health within the umbrella of disability, and it only strengthens our community – not to mention makes things a lot easier for the many people who have both mental health and other conditions simultaneously. OSDC are, depending on student union council, imminently merging with Mind Your Head, the student union’s mental health campaign, to address this.

So, the disability trail project is very much a work in progress, and is growing and is open to more people getting involved. As I discuss it today if you find yourself interested in taking part, regardless of your access needs, pop me an email: the project is very much intended to be a community-based project by staff, students and others with connections to Oxford and Oxfordshire.

LGBTQ+ trail

The project which sparked the idea of making a disability-related trail of objects within the museum was Out in Oxford, an LGBTQ+ trail across GLAM: which is the University’s gardens, libraries and museums. Out in Oxford debuted last academic year and can be found online at glam.ox.ac.uk/out-oxford. Like those objects that had been unearthed or reinterpreted, I knew that there simply must be disability-related objects within Oxford’s collections because people with disabilities have always existed.

Then, through the Oxford University Internship Programme, which the Careers Service hosts yearly, I was lucky enough to get a four-week summer internship at the Pitt Rivers which came with
a research bursary, and so I had the opportunity to dedicate some of the time I was here to building the foundations of the trail at no financial cost to myself.

The Research of Sandell, Dodd and Colleagues

The key works which informed my approach to this were the publications of – and I apologise if I pronounce any names incorrectly – Jocelyn Dodd, Richard Sandell and their colleagues, which I first came across via a TORCH event Sandell spoke at last term, titled ‘Disability Narratives and Histories,’ which can be found online at torch.ox.ac.uk.

Dodd, Sandell, Annie Delin and Jackie Gay’s initial 2004 project, *Buried in the Footnotes*, which is available as a free online PDF, proposed that there would be material in museums relating to the lives of those with disabilities, even if the museum staff themselves were not aware of any such objects or did not have them on display. After contacting a number of museums across the UK, they visited a sample who had expressed a wish to be further involved in the project. By then searching museum databases with a list of mostly outdated and offensive terms because of historical records, they quickly gathered a huge variety of objects, many of which broke the stereotypes of the role of historical people with disabilities within society, revealing figures in a range of professions.

This was then followed up by Dodd, Sandell, Debbie Jolly and Ceri Jones’s 2007-2008 project, *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries* – the outcome of which is again available in a free online PDF. This project saw nine partner museums challenge ableism through experimental displays or films. Audience feedback from visitors suggested this had a profound effect.

Finally, Dodd, Sandell and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson edited the 2010 book *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, which features essays discussing a wide variety of subjects and museums from around the world.

Using the search terms suggested in the *Buried in the Footnotes* project in addition to as many more as I could think of because I had longer to spend on the databases, I also quickly gathered a large list of both objects already on display at the Pitt Rivers and often hidden without a label, and objects currently not on display.

Museum Databases

The museum databases are actually open to the public, and can be found on the Pitt Rivers Museum website to use. To find them you go to the website’s drop down menu on research, and then click search the collections under databases. You will then be brought to a page where you can choose between the object collections and photograph collections databases. And clicking on these will bring you to a page in which you can perform searches with a variety of options for refining them, including being able to choose whether or not the objects are already on display.

Since finishing my internship in July, staff have been adding to the list of disability-related objects as well and so we now have a wide variety of objects either representing figures with disabilities, used by people with disabilities or, importantly, made by people with disabilities.

Because later today we’ll be having object handling sessions with most of the mental-health related objects found so far, I’m actually not going to discuss those objects in this talk. Instead I have some other examples to demonstrate a small portion of the range and to explain the next stages of this project.

Some Examples of the Objects
In the centre of this slide are two small amulets depicting a figure with curvature of the spine wearing a top hat and formal wear. The museum has a large collection of these amulets made of various materials and they are traditional good luck charms in Italy. They were, for example, worn quite frequently by Italian soldiers in the first world war. The aim of this trail would be to not only research the historical and cultural context of this but to importantly have commentary provided by someone or multiple people with a related condition: what do they think of the fact that this is a good luck charm? Is it surprising? Is it objectifying? It’s a chance to reclaim the object’s narrative because current information the museum has about it comes from the perspective of people without this condition, and this comes across in tones used.

On the right of the slide is a shoe embroidered with flowers of various bright colours which would have been worn by someone with bound feet in China. Currently the museum houses their objects on foot binding under a display on body art – but if we question the level of consent there was in foot binding, a procedure carried out at such a young age and which was first made illegal in China in 1912, rather than body art it can be seen as an acquired disability, albeit one with a high social standing. Someone with a link to these objects would again provide commentary.

Finally, on the left hand side of this slide are two objects whose records show they were made by people with disabilities. The first is a bag made of recycled blue, yellow, black, green and white milk cartons, with images of cows on them, which was acquired by the museum in 2011 and made by a group of women with disabilities in Ethiopia. The second is a pale, round wooden water pot with a lid, acquired in 1892 – the historical record says, and I apologise for the term, that it was made ‘by a cripple’. The historical objects crafted by individuals with disabilities importantly shows disabled people as authors, not just subjects, of some of the museum’s collection, and hints at historical roles in society which conflict with assumptions made by the public.

The next stages of the project, in addition to finding more people to contribute, include working on the accessibility of the trail, such as placement of objects within their cases where they will be visible from a variety of heights and for different levels of visual impairment, and preparing the commentary for an app which will feature multiple trails and interpretations and can include ten to twelve of these disability objects. We are hoping to launch the app-based trail in time for UK Disability History Month this year, which is 22nd November to 22nd December, and are hoping that if we were able to successfully receive funding in the near future, then the trail could also be expanded across GLAM and could feature a display dedicated to Disability History Month.

So Why Does This Matter?

So why does this trail matter? Well, when I’ve been going around telling people ‘I’m working on a disability trail at the Pitt Rivers like the LGBTQ+ one,’ I’ve frequently had the response ‘Oh. You mean you’re making a trail for wheelchair users to get around the museum? That’s nice.’ No. No, that’s not what I’m doing. This demonstrates a key finding in Dodd, Sandell and colleagues’ work, that in museums and beyond thinking about disability has been almost entirely eclipsed by accessibility rather than representation. But that’s not enough: we need to do both.

This project will contribute to a wider movement, including Marie’s Let’s Get Disability on the List! Campaign to make disability visible around the university. Members of OSDC and the Staff Disability Network have been going to their faculties and saying we need more disability representation. As an English undergraduate, I’ve been working with some wonderful members
of staff at the English Faculty to secure a literary disability lecture by Dr Clare Barker from the University of Leeds, who will be speaking at our faculty on 23rd November, as well as a disability display in the faculty library. This even resulted in the faculty contacting OSDC to request some of our badges for staff to wear and other materials to put up, which has been a fantastic outcome. Our mental health officer and secretary, Julia Alsop, as a Music undergraduate, has also been achieving excellent results with the music faculty, with Professor Laurie Stras coming to speak on music and disability next term on 21st January.

So please go away from this today and talk to your departments – in person or by email. Ask them to stock up on OSDC badges and bookmarks, and to engage with disability studies at least for disability history month. And if you’re interested in being involved with the Pitt Rivers project you can email me at oxisability@oxfordsu.ox.ac.uk or for other enquiries miranda.reilly@hertford.ox.ac.uk.

Thank you very much!