

AHRC collaborative doctoral award

University of Edinburgh, School of Education

Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS)

Introduction

This studentship, fully funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, with additional funding from the collaborating partner, will support three years of full-time study. The student will investigate how the internet is changing the way users engage with, and learn from, the collections of cultural institutions, with supervision provided by Dr Sian Bayne (School of Education, University of Edinburgh) and Ms Rebecca Bailey (Education and Outreach, RCAHMS).

Basing the study on the online education and outreach activities of RCAHMS, the broad remit of the project is to explore how new online media environments change and challenge the curatorial and outreach responsibilities of museums, galleries and archives. The student will be based in the Department of Higher and Community Education in the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh.

The studentship covers all UK fees, and includes an allowance of £12,940 per academic year, plus an additional annual £1,500 maintenance payment provided by the AHRC and RCAHMS. The successful applicant may also be eligible for support for UK study visits and one overseas study visit as well as one overseas conference for the duration of the award.

Eligibility

We welcome applications from those with a good first degree – and preferably a Masters qualification – in a related subject. This might include Museum and Gallery Studies, Art History, Archaeology, Science and Technology Studies, E-learning and related areas. For more on eligibility, please see the AHRC's academic and residence criteria for doctoral study at:

http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/postgrad/postgrad_details_d/eligibility.asp

Project title

In the hands of the user: changing patterns of participation and learning through the digital collections of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland

Project outline

The proposed project will take place within the context of recent and rapid alteration in authorship and participation practices on the internet. These are forging changes in our understanding of the role of users in contributing to the public online presence of cultural institutions, the ways in which users might contribute to the 'making' and 'unmaking' of public archives, and the ways in which a global public learns and constructs meaning from institutions' digital collections.

The rise of what has been described as 'Web 2.0' has shifted the way in which we interact online. Through frameworks for allowing the relatively easy production of user-generated content (through weblogs, wikis, social media and user tagging) a global community of users and learners are potentially able to engage in an 'architecture of participation' around digital image collections – one that is oriented toward openness, distributed authorship, collaboration and social networking.

Such engagement re-formulates the nature of the interplay between text and image, and between the user and the collection. It might constitute users curating their own digital collections online, interpreting and writing publicly about their own understandings of particular images, juxtaposing publicly available images from the archive with personal photographs and paintings, manipulating and personalising archive images, or networking and collaborating online with a wide community of like-minded users.

The public interpretation of collections thus has the potential to shift, via digitisation and networking, from the control of specialised designers, curators and education professionals into the hands of the users. It is a shift which is invigorating yet also problematic, raising many interesting research questions relating to the power relationship between institution and user, to the notion of ownership of the digital collection, and to the emergent and shifting place of curator and learner, of expert and amateur.

Project aims and objectives

The proposed project will explore the implications of this shifting media landscape for the online education and outreach activities of RCAHMS. Its main aims are:

- to undertake a study of the (relatively short) history of online museum education and the emergence of user-generated content within that context, and to map the position of RCAHMS against a review of the use of user-generated content within cultural heritage collections internationally
- to examine the implications of online user interaction with digital collections in terms of over-arching themes relating to power and participation, changing patterns of knowledge generation and dissemination, and the educational potential of 'Web 2.0' for a community of user-learners which is both local and global
- to explore how the new media environment might enhance, change and challenge the curatorial and outreach responsibilities of RCAHMS, and generate ideas for ways in which RCAHMS might respond to such challenges.

Intellectual issues to be addressed

The education and outreach remit of cultural heritage organisations in the digital age must operate within a complex and conflicted field of influences and imperatives. Alongside the new opportunities for public participation in the interpretation of objects online lies a fundamental change in the *nature* of the object, as a result of digitisation programmes which transform material, 'possessable' artefacts into volatile amalgams of bits and bytes. The ability of users to take, manipulate, re-distribute and re-describe digital objects is a primary source of their educational value. It is also, however, a source of difficulty for institutions as they come to terms with the changing patterns of ownership, participation and knowledge production we are experiencing in the current media age.

The user-learner has, in this context, a level of control over and access to the digital image or object which is far in excess of their ability to alter – or even touch – its 'real' counterpart. This is accompanied, where users participate in blogging and social networking around objects, by their ability to contribute in a new way to the public understanding and interpretation of these digital

artefacts. An element of power shifts to the user of the digital object, and away from the institutional custodian responsible for the conservation of the original.

While agendas for lifelong learning mesh well with programmes of digitisation and associated internet-based education, there are additional conflicts relating to patterns of participation around digital image collections which are not easily negotiated. 'Web 2.0' technologies give learners unprecedented ways of re-claiming, re-contextualising and re-forming knowledge around objects into personally meaningful, and very public, configurations. Yet a more top-down, transmissive, institutionally-focused and controlled tradition has a long and established history within many museums and archives. Cultural institutions like RCAHMS must therefore grapple with some serious questions relating to their educational remit and mission in the current media age. What is now the role of the museum educator? What is the value and place of expertise, curatorship and cultural stewardship in the age of the internet? Does the rise of user-generated content conflict with the existing mission of the institution? How can institutional agendas work with – rather than against – current media practices in encouraging, nurturing and managing user-generated content around their collections?

Approach and working methods

An analysis of the nature and impact of RCAHMS' early experiments with user-generated web content is likely to form part of the project. These include three websites launched in 2007 which each take a different approach to user interaction: The Sir Basil Spence Archive Project (www.basilspence.org.uk) which includes user memory- and image-sharing around their experiences of Spence's architecture, Scotland's Rural Past (www.scotlandsruralpast.org.uk) which asks users to contribute survey material to the RCAHMS record, and Treasured Places (www.treasuredplaces.org.uk). This third site is part of the Treasured Places centenary project and includes the ability for users to interact with the digital collections by voting for their favourite image and creating weblog entries around items from the collection. Its second phase will be launched in May 2009, and will form the focus for the research to be undertaken. This research will engage with an emerging framework for extending the public contribution to the RCAHMS Canmore database (www.rcahms.gov.uk/search), which forms this further phase of the Treasured Places project during 2009.

The detail of the research methodology will be negotiated with the student, but a broadly qualitative – possibly virtual ethnographic – approach will be taken in mapping the emergence and growth of new, public, online spaces at RCAHMS. The educational and conceptual implications of such new modes of interaction will be explored, and conclusions drawn which will guide the future outreach work of RCAHMS and help inform the educational missions of cultural institutions more widely.

Application procedure

Please apply by submitting the following:

- The University of Edinburgh standard application form for postgraduate study, available at: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/postgraduate/applying/forms>
- Names of two academic referees

- An outline project proposal, detailing your own area of particular interest in relation to the project, and outlining your own approach to the research, as far as you can formulate it at this stage
- A covering letter making it clear that you are applying for the AHRC award

Please submit the application to the following address, by 13 June 2008:

The Postgraduate Office
College of Humanities and Social Science
The University of Edinburgh
1st Floor, David Hume Tower
George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JX

phone: +44(0)131 651 3122

fax: +44 (0)131 650 6536

email: hsspg@ed.ac.uk

To discuss the project informally, please contact Mrs Pam Holgate (0131 651 6120, pam.holgate@ed.ac.uk) or Ms Rebecca Bailey (0131 662 1456, rebecca.bailey@rcahms.gov.uk).

It is anticipated that interviews will be held during the week of 7th July.