CASE STUDY SEVEN

Connecting Africa: co-creating Cameroon’s mobile culture

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Call box acquired for Cameroon project. © Sjoerd Epe Sijsma / Eyeses / Science Museum.

Project background

The project is part of a wider program of participatory projects that aims to put our audience at the heart of the development of forthcoming Science Museum gallery, Information Age. The gallery covers the history of communication and includes a section on mobile phones in the developing world, specifically in Cameroon. There was a clear need for the Cameroonian community to be involved in the development of this story, to reflect on its social and economical impact.
Phase 1: In 2011, members of the London Cameroonian community were consulted on how the Museum could tell the story of mobile phone usage in Cameroon. Their input helped to inform and influence a planned object collecting trip to Cameroon in March 2012, during which objects were collected, interviews conducted and photographs taken to contribute to the display of this story in Information Age.

Phase 2: From late 2012, the Museum has been working with participants to create a display that tells the story of mobile telephony in Cameroon, providing authentic representation of Cameroonians’ stories. Members of the London Cameroonian community have worked with the design and content teams on Information Age to co-create the design and interpretation of this section of the gallery. Further participation will be conducted to inform the text, images and audio-visual interpretation of this story.

Aims and outcomes

To work with the Cameroon community, both in London and overseas, to co-create a user led, authentic display of the story that is built on the experience and knowledge of the community.

Are/were you merely providing access / information or is this a project with mutual aims and outcomes?

Our ambition is to give the Cameroon community real agency in deciding how their mobile heritage is presented to the Science Museum’s visitors. The group we have worked with have produced original content, objects and ideas as well as affecting the ways we will display material we already have in the collection.

How were the aims/outcomes agreed?

The initial project plan was agreed and signed off by the gallery’s Project Leader and informed by the Lead Curator and Head of Audience Research. As part of the introduction to the participation project, the group were asked what their expectations were for the project, what they hoped to get from the experience of working on the project and what they wanted the display to say to visitors. Together we formed joint aims and all the work that followed on the display and content was based around these aims.

Who are/were the lead personnel on the project?

Deanne Naula, Learning and Participation Co-ordinator for Information Age, and Charlotte Connelly, Content Developer for Information Age

Who are/ were you working with (a whole community, a selected group or an Individual)? Please describe:
The group were self-selected members of the London based Cameroon community, recruited through community networks, with access to these individuals provided through a platform community organisation, the Cameroon Forum.

**Are you clear about why you are working with this selected group and with their role as representative of others? Please comment:**

There were very clear content needs for this project. We knew we would be telling a story about mobile phones in Cameroon, and to help us to tell the story as accurately and authentically as possible we recruited people who know the country and the impact that mobile phones have had on the people and the place.

**Assessment of authority: why are/were you dealing with this individual or group; how are/were they empowered to speak on behalf of a community? Are/were you satisfied with their ‘credentials’?**

They are sharing their personal experiences and providing specific examples rather than being asked to represent the nation as a whole.
Partners – who are/were they? (Please provide website addresses if possible):

The individual participants

The Cameroon Forum helped build the group: [http://www.cameroon-forum.org/](http://www.cameroon-forum.org/)

We worked with Professor Mirjam de Bruijn of the African Studies Centre in Leiden: [http://www.ascleiden.nl/](http://www.ascleiden.nl/)

Universal Design Studio are the 3D designers for the Information Age gallery: [http://universaldesignstudio.com/](http://universaldesignstudio.com/)

Is/was it a museum-to-museum/ cultural centre project?

No, we were working directly with individuals from the Cameroonian community in London.

What are/were the budgets and other resources? (e.g. grant awards, dedicated staff, sponsorship):

This participative work was part of a wider project, and as a result it did not have a dedicated budget. Part of Deanne Naula’s role as Learning and Participation Coordinator was to develop and manage the relationship with the participants. Charlotte Connelly also spent time working with the group to share ideas about content and the museum development process more generally.

What are/were the timescales?

Phase 1 took place over several months from December 2011 to March 2012.

Phase 2 began with recruitment in May 2012, and will be ongoing until the gallery opens in September 2014.

Ethical considerations – describe what these involved in relation to the project and how they were agreed/adhered to?

Our ethical considerations for the participation project included asking participants to consent to our use of images and recordings of the process, and creating a safe and open environment during sessions so the group could share personal stories and express opinions within a respectful space. We have and will continue to discuss how contributions will be recognised on and off gallery as well as working with the group on legacies that will benefit the community as well as the Museum. In terms of collecting objects in Cameroon, we were mindful of ethical considerations which were discussed extensively within the Museum. When purchasing items we were careful to offer a fair price for both the object and the seller’s time, where appropriate. We also ensured that we did not coerce people into selling. Our acquisition paperwork was simplified so that we could more easily communicate the process of buying objects to people when English was not their first language.
Please also describe any compromises, surprises and how the project may have been transformed through the engagement:

Almost every aspect of the final display is different as a result of the participative project. One surprising outcome was the way the group chose to represent their historical communications heritage as an important part of their lives today. It now has a cultural and ceremonial significance rather than a practical function, but maintains a very high status despite no longer being a widely used tool. Working in a participatory way challenged the Museum to share its voice and authority with others external to the organisation. As a museum, we had to make compromises about our expectations and preconceptions of what the final display and content might turn out to be while maintaining the high standard of the outcome.

What things would you consider if embarking on a similar project again?

We would allow more time for the participative elements of the project, and have more staff time dedicated to the project to include more training. We also know more about working in an environment like Cameroon now, and would plan some of the logistical aspects differently.
What things would you avoid?

Working with other organisational partners was challenging, and in future we would always ensure that all organisations shared their aspirations and goals fully in advance so we could identify potential risks and work around them. It would also help us to manage the expectations of the organisations and the participants in the process.

References to publications relating to project (online/in print):

Connelly, Charlotte, 2013. ‘The many politics of displaying Cameroon’s mobile culture’, http://mobileafrica revisited.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/charlotte-connelly-paper.docx