



# Please do touch

**Annie Grant** meets the purpleSTARS who are pioneering ways to make museums and heritage sites more engaging for people with learning disabilities

**On a hot July morning, a group of young people with learning disabilities are in a workshop with curators from the Museum of London.**

But it's not the museum staff who are leading the session, it's the young people. They are from a group called purpleSTARS, which brings together artists and technologists, with and without disabilities, to transform museum experiences. Using sensory objects and digital media, they create alternative interpretations of museum collections and also work directly with museums to encourage them to become more inclusive.

## ***A new kind of exhibit***

As the workshop gets underway, Judith Appiah, a young woman with a learning disability, sits next to Sara Wajid, head of engagement at the Museum of London, and demonstrates how to make a 'sensory label'.

She asks Ms Wajid to select an object that means something to her and describe its significance. Ms Wajid's words will be captured onto a 'recordable postcard' so that they can be played back at the

press of a button. Ms Wahid rummages in her handbag and produces a set of earplugs, and after a quick lesson from Judith, makes a recording explaining that her earplugs are important to her because they help her get through periods of insomnia. Next, she decorates her postcard with a drawing of tired, drooping eyes following nights without sleep, and the purpleSTARS team display her object under glass, museum-style, along with the sensory label that describes it.

Her colleague Hazel Vernon, SEND schools programme manager at the museum, chooses sunblock because it protects her skin and its fragrance reminds her of holidays gone by. After recording her message, Ms Vernon's object is also displayed under glass, next to its sensory label, which she has decorated with shells, adding a squirt of sunscreen in a small plastic bag, to produce an evocative smell.

## ***A sensory approach***

The sensory labels demonstrated to museum staff by the purpleSTARS are examples of the kinds of outcomes that people might produce after a 'sensory

expedition' around a museum or heritage site.

The concept was developed by young people with learning disabilities, their support workers, multimedia advocacy specialists, engineers and artists as part of a 'sensory objects' project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). It is a simple approach that can be used by people with learning disabilities when visiting any museum, gallery or heritage site, however formal or inaccessible it may appear at first. At the heart of a sensory expedition is the idea of engaging with and making a personal response to some of the exhibits on show.

Visitors explore the setting using as many senses as possible, looking out for things they find visually interesting or that have fascinating textures, sounds or smells. They then 'collect' these using, for example:

- photographs, video or sketches to capture images of interesting objects or things that might sound good, or that they might be interesting to taste, touch or smell
- a sound recorder to record intriguing sounds, e.g. footsteps on a wooden floor

in a stately home, a clock chiming or a creaking door

- a simple water blaster or bicycle pump to suck up smells, which are then stored in a small plastic bag
- rubbings to show texture.

Afterwards, they draw on the materials they have brought back to produce a tangible and very personal response to their visit, using art, craft techniques and technology.

### **Ownership and inclusivity**

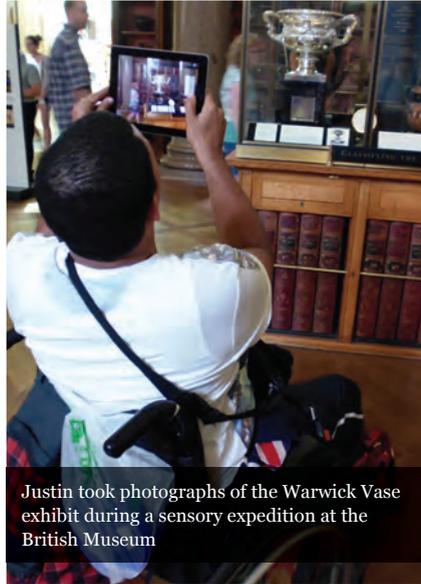
Dr Kate Allen, associate professor of art at Reading University and one of the key partners in purpleSTARS, explains the power of the approach.

‘Often, when people with learning disabilities visit museums, they are “done unto”,’ she explains. ‘We asked ourselves: “Is there a way of giving them some sort of ownership?” and came up with an art workshop approach, where they collect their material, think about ideas, imagine things, and then try to make them.’

Over the three years of the sensory objects project, the purpleSTARS team developed and refined the approach working with three museums and heritage sites: Speke Hall in Liverpool, the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) in Reading and the British Museum in London. For those involved, the experience has been transformational.

During a sensory expedition at the British Museum, Judith Appiah, who is of Ghanaian heritage, was attracted by a pair of ancient slippers from Africa. She sketched and photographed them and carried out some research to find out more. In a follow-up art workshop with fellow purpleSTARS, she made a replica of the sandals in leatherette, adding a leather aroma to make them smell authentic. She then worked with a technologist to introduce a sensor that triggered the sounds of walking in sandals and African music whenever the slipper was bent.

Professor Andy Minnion, director of RIX Research and Media at the University of



Justin took photographs of the Warwick Vase exhibit during a sensory expedition at the British Museum

**“Hold an exhibit, touch it and feel it, and the story begins to come to life”**

East London (UEL), another purpleSTARS partner, stresses the importance of sensory experiences when it comes to including people with learning disabilities. ‘In many museums the exhibits are behind glass and their story is told using complicated written words,’ he says. ‘If I have a learning disability and reading is a challenge, I’ll have a sense that the experience is not for me because I can’t connect with it. But let me hold it, touch it and feel it and the story begins to come to life for me, and that sensory experience helps me step over the barriers to being included.’

### **Sensory labels in action**

As well as providing a multisensory way of describing museum exhibits, sensory labels can offer visitors with learning disabilities ways of expressing their

personal responses, just as curators from the Museum of London did in the purpleSTARS workshop.

‘They offer new ways of interpreting objects,’ says Professor Minnion, citing the example of football fan Justin, a young man with a learning disability, who was attracted to a silver replica of the Warwick Vase displayed in the Enlightenment Gallery, one of the most traditional rooms at the British Museum, because it reminded him of the European Cup.

‘Following his visit, he made a tin foil representation of the European Cup, which helped bring to life the association he had made,’ he recalls. ‘His sensory label captured his memories of his experience when Liverpool came from 3-1 down and won on penalties, with snippets of audio commentary and the smell of vinegar from his fish and chips.’

‘The idea of sensory expeditions and the artefacts they inspire is to unlock just those sorts of personal responses, allowing people to present the story they want to tell,’ agrees Dr Allen. ‘For people with learning disabilities, a museum visit is often not about the history, it’s about now. Obviously, some of the artefacts are incredibly old and very valuable, but the response of someone with a learning disability to an ancient Chinese bowl might be more about the way it makes them think about how they enjoy eating breakfast with their grandma.’

‘We’re not suggesting that one replaces the other,’ she adds. ‘But there are different ways of looking at objects, which makes it much more complex and interesting.’

At the end of their time at the British Museum, purpleSTARS presented their objects and labels to the public at a pop-up event in the Enlightenment Gallery. ‘They were so confident,’ remembers Dr Allen. ‘They suddenly became really important, there was a shift in respect for them when they said: “I’ve got this amazing object and I can make you look at these exhibits in a different way if you come with me on my journey.”’



The creation of Judith Appiah’s personal response to a pair of ancient African sandals, from first noticing the exhibit through to completion of her interpretation

‘The best response we got was from the museum itself,’ she continues. ‘Different members of staff kept coming up and saying, “We ought to do this more often. Why isn’t this happening?” It shifted their attitude.’

**Changing museum culture**

As part of the sensory objects project, purpleSTARS also worked directly with the three museums to help them rethink the curation of their collections to make them more engaging for visitors with learning disabilities.

Isabel Hughes, head of curatorial and public engagement at MERL, remembers their early visits. ‘When the young people first came here they wanted to know what the things were and how do they worked,’ she recalls. ‘But when we started to talk about farming and food, they said: “Well, where are the smells? Where’s the grass? Where are the animals?” And they were right!’

After experimenting with prototypes, including a wellington boot covered in ‘cow hide’ material that mooed when you rubbed it, the museum decided to work with the purpleSTARS to create more permanent interactive exhibits. These now include a sheep in a woolly jumper that baas as you walk by and an interactive cow that smells of milk chocolate and allows visitors to record and hear back their own mooing sounds. ‘We also put soundtracks on black and white archive film of cheese-making, using bicycle pumps and water and that sort of thing,’ remembers Dr Allen. ‘It was a really nice way to animate the collection.’

More ambitiously, in response to the purpleSTARS questioning why they couldn’t sit on the many vehicles in the collection, the museum has bought a quad bike and is working with the young people to create a virtual reality sheep-herding experience, that will be accessible by sitting on the quad bike or from a wheelchair. purpleSTARS and MERL are also working with Dutch film company, Shosho to transform a two-dimensional animation of the passing seasons that currently plays in the MERL introductory gallery into a 3-D virtual reality experience, including a range of animals and other features suggested by the young people.

‘Going to the countryside is a very sensory experience and one of our challenges as a countryside museum is to reflect this,’ says Ms Hughes. ‘But this is not just about consulting a particular group of people and seeing what they



Hazel Vernon has decorated her sensory label with shells, reminiscent of seaside holidays in days gone by

would like, it’s a genuine partnership that has made us think differently about how we do things. We now automatically consider multisensory possibilities as we carry out our work.’

Phillippa Heath, MERL’s learning and engagement manager agrees. ‘It has changed my practice,’ she says. ‘It has given us all the enthusiasm to develop this kind of work further because it has so much potential benefit, not just for visitors with learning disabilities, but for all our visitors.’

MERL has also extended its commitment to increasing the visibility of people with learning disabilities in museum settings by providing extended work placement opportunities for students from Reading College, enabling them to develop museum-specific skills, such as front of house, organising archives and looking after the chickens, as well as more widely transferable skills.

**Opportunities for enterprise**

As news about the work of purpleSTARS spread, it generated a lot of interest within the museum sector, and the team, whose

**Taking children and young people with learning disabilities to museums and heritage sites**

- Contact the museum and talk to staff about what you would like to do on your visit.
- Visit the museum and familiarise yourself with the opportunities and possibilities.
- Consider leading a sensory expedition (see pull-out resource pages 23-26) and familiarise pupils with the approach.
- On the visit, encourage pupils to develop personal responses to artefacts. Talk to them to help draw out their stories.
- Following their visit, consider how pupils can develop their personal responses, using the materials they have collected during the sensory expedition, through practical, creative projects.

grant funding had come to an end, started thinking about options for the future.

‘We wondered if this was a service that museums might buy into and if we might have a viable enterprise here, where purpleSTARS brokers opportunities with museums and heritage sites, and provides the support framework and the creative methods and approaches,’ explains Professor Minnion. ‘That got us very excited because the range of employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities is so limited. We thought maybe there is another role, an advisory and training role around public culture, where people with learning disabilities who are “experts by experience” bring their multimedia and multisensory approaches to reinterpreting collections and making them more meaningful and more inclusive.’

Judith Appiah has clear ideas about what makes an inclusive museum. ‘We need to be able to see and touch the objects,’ she says. ‘Maybe there could be more replicas. At MERL we couldn’t touch things so we introduced virtual reality.’ She also suggests that projections with sound could be used to provide more background about displayed objects, and visual information showing how historical objects relate to the modern context.

Although the purpleSTARS enterprise is still in its infancy, it is already working with new museums, including Glenside Hospital Museum in Bristol, the Ragged School Museum in London and the Museum of London, which is taking the opportunity provided by its relocation to Smithfields in 2021 to review the way it represents people with learning disabilities through its collections, and the way it welcomes people with learning disabilities into the museum.

‘The purpleSTARS are exactly the kind of creative and interesting people that I want to collaborate with in developing the new Museum of London,’ says head of engagement, Sara Wajid, enthused by what she learned in the workshop. ‘Hopefully, the people I have met here are the museum workers of the future.’

Annie Grant is a freelance consultant, producer, writer and editor

**FIND OUT MORE**

- purpleSTARS: <https://purplestars.org.uk>
- Sensory objects project: <http://sensoryobjects.com>
- Recordable postcards available from TTS Group: <http://bit.ly/sc244-30>