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‘Sex and History’: Talking Sex with Objects from the Past

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Imagine taking a medieval chastity belt or a Roman phallic pendant into a classroom of 15-year-olds.[1] What kinds of conversations would ensue? How might such conversations help achieve the goals of school-based sexuality education? How might such activities contribute to promoting healthy sexual development? These are the activities and questions driving research at the University of Exeter, UK. The Sex and History project uses intriguing, surprising, and often beautiful historical artefacts that either depict an aspect of sex or sexuality, or had a sexual significance or purpose in their original historical context, as a tool for generating open conversations with young people

[1] The authors are jointly and equally responsible for the text and accompanying research.

The original version of this chapter was revised. An erratum to this chapter can be found at https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-40033-8_34

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L. Allen, M.L. Rasmussen (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education*, DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-40033-8_2

about sex.[2] Originating from the historical research conducted by historian Kate Fisher and Classicists Rebecca Langlands and Jen Grove, the project has worked with sex educationalists and the museum sector in the UK in a range of activities to develop an adaptable methodology that uses objects from the past as a means of encouraging healthy sexual development.[3] This has supported museum outreach programmes, brought sexuality education into core subjects such as history and performing arts, and created specific classroom resources for use within stand-alone sexuality education programmes for pupils aged 14–18. The project responds to issues identified by the health and education sector in the UK and internationally, particularly relating to the widely attested difficulty for teachers of opening up conversations around important topics such as consent and pornography.

The Methodology: How it Developed and How it Works

Our project uses objects from the past as its starting point. It builds on our research investigating the ways in which people and cultures throughout history have thought about their own sexual identities and practices through comparison with those from history (Fisher and Langlands 2009, 2011, 2015b; Grove 2015). This new approach to the history of sexuality has found that interpretations of the past have been used across human culture as a means of legitimising, articulating, and disseminating knowledge about sexual identities, customs, and practices (Fisher and Langlands 2015a, Fisher and Funke 2015). In particular, we have identified the value of historical, visual, and material culture to inspire debates about contemporary sexuality (Grove 2015). For instance, we found that the large quantity of sexually-themed statues and wall paintings from the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum have sparked public debates following their mass rediscovery in the eighteenth century up to the present day (Fisher and Langlands 2009, 2011, 2015b). Such ancient images, we found, have been viewed as immediate and accessible snapshots of the ancient past and its attitudes to such issues as censorship, acceptable sexual behaviours, and sexual libertinism—provoking rich reflection for many modern audiences on how contemporary society compares.

Applying this historical research to our work with young people today, we have found that historical objects can be used to form the basis of open, lively,

[2] Information about the project can be found here: http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/sexandhistory/

[3] For the underpinning historical research see, for example, Fisher and Langlands 2009, 2011, 2015a; Grove 2015.

respectful, and important conversations around issues deemed important by teachers and of significance to young people's lives. This builds upon museum studies research, including that of our collaborators in the museum sector, which also champions the use of historical objects as a captivating medium through which to provoke discussion of contemporary issues (Vayne 2012).

The methodology works in the following way. Young people are introduced to objects, either through museum visits to see collections, or remotely via models, replicas, 3D imaging, or—by far the simplest and cheapest method—through the medium of photographic images. During workshops facilitated by professionals in the area of youth work, museums, creative arts, and/or sexual health, young participants are invited to imagine and discuss the potential purpose and significance of these objects; this initial exploration is subsequently enhanced by expert historical opinion, which is used to further highlight important areas for discussion or prompt exploration of key themes. As a result of in-class observation, feedback from teachers, sex educationalists, youth facilitators, focus groups, and interviews with young people, we have identified five main factors that make historical objects, and the interplay between the past and the present which they evoke, particularly productive starting points for valuable discussions about sex:

- Arresting, visually stimulating objects provide a sense of immediacy and non-linguistic engagement with the past (making them useful for students who are less confident with written or highly verbal materials).
- Historical uncertainty (even among experts) about the meaning or purpose of some objects provokes independent thought that raises confidence.
- The unfamiliarity and otherness of objects from past cultures highlights cultural diversity, which can lead to the development of a new critical distance from today's cultural attitudes and a new perspective on sexuality today.
- The historical status of the objects creates a sense of distance and depersonalises discussion, reducing the pressure on participants to talk directly about themselves and their own experiences.
- The existence of objects from past cultures communicates the sense that an interest in sex is perennial and an acceptable part of being human.

Easier discussion about sex is generated by focusing on intriguing and unusual objects from the past, rather than basing the session explicitly around the modern-day issues confronting young people. Using historical objects is a 'distancing technique' which sexuality education guidance has recognised as valuable in facilitating classroom debate (Blake 2013, p. 38, 85). A discussion which explores attitudes and ideas from other cultures and societies enables

young people to bring as much or as little of themselves to the fore as they feel comfortable doing, and provides them with mechanisms through which important issues that concern them can be addressed without a spotlight being shone on their own particular circumstances or experiences. For many teachers and students, this method has been proven to be effective in reducing the potential for embarrassment, which is a common risk during sexuality education sessions. As one facilitator told us:

> I think they [the objects] worked absolutely brilliantly because it's a difficult subject to bring up with young people. … So by putting an article in the middle of the room, everybody is able to put their attitudes or their opinions or their thoughts onto it without feeling too exposed themselves. … It just puts the object at the centre of the discussion as opposed to the young person, or the adult who is delivering the session. (Louise McDermott, Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro)

The value of this method is that, even when such distancing techniques are in operation, young people are able to draw parallels between the historical cultures and attitudes and their own contemporary experiences. In the sessions that we have observed, conversations about the history of sexuality were always implicitly about contemporary issues, generating debates about historical societies which moved easily into more direct and explicit articulation of modern issues. For instance, we have worked with a wooden mirror-box made in nineteenth-century China which, if opened with the right alignment of components, folds out to reveal painted scenes showing couples engaged in various sexual acts. This object was used in one session by a 17-year-old male participant to talk about intimacy and the private use of images of sex between a couple; through the object, he and his peers also examined and critiqued their own ideas about commitment and attitudes towards having multiple sexual partners.

Often with minimal guidance, participants were able to draw sophisticated inferences from the historical material and apply them to their own lives and concerns. One teacher we have worked with reflected:

> [The] objects act as a go-between. They facilitate discussion, they make it okay to talk about sex. … The students unburdened stuff they wanted to talk about … we've never found a better way to do it. It was a revelation. (Rev Hammer, Exeter Academy of Music and Sound)

Participants also reported that after the sessions they found themselves able to talk with their parents about sex and relationships in ways that they had not

been able to previously. Describing the objects and what they had learnt about them gave young people the leeway to start conversations at home that led to productive intergenerational discussions about sex-related matters. In this way, the project has the capacity to open up new channels of communication between parents and children outside the classroom. As one student reported:

> I even spoke to my mum about it … got home and was like, 'you'll never guess what I did at college.' … She was surprised … so I started talking to her about it and she was like 'oh, that's really interesting' and I was like yeah, it was [and] because it was nothing to do with me, it was like easy to talk about. She kept asking me loads of questions. (Anonymous, in interview conducted by Sarah Jones, University of Exeter)

In particular, the distancing achieved by using objects as a focus for group discussion facilitates debates about emotional and socially contentious topics which are especially difficult to confront directly in the classroom, such as relationships, power, gender, pleasure, identity, and social pressures (Graham 2015, p. 17; Brook, PSHE Association and Sex Education Forum 2014, p. 5). These most pressing issues are precisely the subjects of the discussions that are naturally generated by consideration of historical objects.

The objects confront young people with alternative worlds, with different ways of approaching sex, and with sometimes radically different cultural attitudes from their own. They give young people prompts to re-examine their own assumptions and to question ideas that they may have previously accepted as inevitable or unchallengeable. The artefacts promote the development of new critical perspectives on modern relationships and sexual cultures, providing authoritative tools that enable young people to make independent and considered choices. As one teacher recognised:

> it enables you to have a critique of where we are … it enables us to recognise that the way we categorise relationships is actually quite transient … holding up that mirror to ourselves is quite educative. (Anonymous)

This helps young people to build skills in critical thinking and to develop the ability to re-examine contemporary models of sex and relationships which they are encountering from their peers, the media, and elsewhere. One of our favourite objects for use in these sessions is a beautiful Japanese carved ivory clamshell from the nineteenth century, which opens up to reveal a miniature engraving of a woman apparently reading a book with an illustration of an erect penis, while pulling up her skirts to reveal her genitals, including intri-

cately carved pubic hair. This object has sparked lively conversations among young people about the consumption of pornography, cultural variation in concepts of what is beautiful, and how notions of pleasure are gendered. Such conversations encouraged young people to understand their own world as one in which certain models of beauty or expectations of behaviour constrain individuals. In this way, young people have been able to contextualise and historicise their own feelings and potential anxieties around pornography, pleasure, and body image. Sexually explicit objects from the past such as this one also challenge the often-held assumption that the world has become more open and liberated in its discussion of sexual matters in recent decades. Participants often express surprise that depictions of sex have always existed in cultures around the world, and they are intrigued to discover objects that appear to indicate that sex was openly enjoyed and embraced in some past cultures. As this comment from a male participant aged 17 suggests, this can prompt a re-examination of assumptions:

> [The activity] made me wonder how liberal we are in our society today … maybe we're not as much as we thought we were. (Anonymous, 17)

The very existence of these historical artefacts, and especially their 'high' status as museum objects, can serve to reduce the stigma associated with the discussion of sex, and to empower young people to discuss topics which matter to them. In this case, it is the reassurance of recognising that people have been talking about, thinking about, and depicting sex for millennia that can break down barriers and enhance confidence. In our work, participants have reported a marked impact on their attitudes to talking about sex after they have participated in the object-focused sessions, suggesting they may feel more justified in talking openly about it, as well as being better equipped to do so. For instance, a male participant, aged 16, reflected:

> Why [do] we criticise sex so much when all we need to do is to look back and discover that people have been having a lot of fun for centuries. (Anonymous, 16)

Our work has shown that these artefacts, precisely because they are valued as 'artistic,' heritage, or cultural specimens which have been collected and stored within institutional establishments such as museums, offer a challenge to the notion that sex and discussion of it should be viewed as something inherently offensive, inappropriate, or in need of being censored. In particular, these objects are seen as something rather different from modern

pornographic images, and can help young people to critique contemporary images of sex and assess their cultural significance.

Where This Methodology Works

We have developed a range of resources to implement this powerful method for engaging young people through historical artefacts in a variety of settings (details and links for each project are included as we discuss them below). This includes the teaching of sexuality education lessons within schools. However, our approach is adaptable for different settings and contexts where informal sexuality education or work around healthy sexual development takes place. In addition to sexuality education, the methodology has been used in other subject lessons in schools (e.g. integrated into art, history, or drama classes or projects), out-of-school youth activities, programmes for disadvantaged youth, health, and social services, and heritage and museum outreach programmes.

Formal Sexuality Education in Schools

Our work in the area of formal sexuality education has taken place within the context of UK, and specifically English, secondary schools, and sixth form colleges (UK Key Stages 4 and 5, ages 14–18).[4] At the time of writing, 'Sex and Relationships Education' (SRE) is not part of the national curriculum in England and Wales except as part of the Science curriculum where teaching about biological reproduction and about HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections is a statutory requirement. However, the UK government's statutory guidance states that schools should take up sex education which supports young people through their 'physical, emotional, and moral development' as part of a programme of Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) education, itself a non-statutory subject (DfE 2000). At the time of writing, there is substantial national pressure on the UK government to make PSHE a statutory subject (Graham 2015). There is therefore considerable debate about UK sexuality education provision, regarding the nature, types, or extent of teaching across schools in the UK, and much anxiety about what is and what is not discussed with pupils (Graham 2015; DfE 2015). For example, in 2013, a report of the government schools inspectorate found that SRE 'required improvement in over a third of schools,' and that secondary school

[4] A pilot teaching resource pack for UK Key Stages 4 and 5 (ages 14–18) is available for free download here: http://www.rsehub.org.uk/resources/sex-and-history-introductory-resource/

education placed too much emphasis on 'the mechanics' of reproduction, at the expense of emotion and relationships issues (Ofsted 2013, p. 4, 6).

These comments reflect broader international research into the nature of adolescent sexual development and the identification of a set of new goals for sexuality education (McKee et al. 2010). Such research calls for sexuality education worldwide to move away from a risk perspective, through which the aim is to protect young people from perceived dangers of adolescent sexuality (such as pregnancy, diseases, or abusive relationships) towards a positive attempt to encourage healthy sexual development (Allen 2007). Researchers have highlighted the need for sexuality education which focuses on the promotion of physical, mental, and social health as well as positive identity development (Lefkowitz and Vasilenko 2014).

Our project responds to these appeals for improvements to sex education both nationally and internationally. In the UK, we have worked with key voluntary agencies who seek to support teachers in addressing the emotional, social, and cultural learning around sex and relationships—that which is recommended, but not prescribed or supported, by government legislation. We have collaborated closely with one such agency, the Relationships and Sex Education Hub (RSE Hub), who provide advice and support to the South West region of England and has input into national debates about the improvement of sexuality education. We have worked with this agency on the development of pilot teaching resources, informed by and linked to national campaigns to improve sexuality education teaching. In developing the resources, we have also worked with and consulted a range of teachers, local education officers, health professionals, and sexual health charities to choose materials, to ensure that they are appropriate for target age groups, and to meet key governmental targets.[5] These collaborations have also ensured that our resources include appropriate advice to teachers on the safeguarding of participants, the setting of ground rules, and the provision of ongoing support.

In collaboration with the RSE Hub, we have produced a pilot teaching resource aimed at PSHE lessons in UK Key Stages 4 and 5, which translates into age groups 14–16 and 16–18. This includes suggested classroom activities based around two historical objects and specific learning outcomes and key themes, as well as guidance material and digital support. We are in the early stages of evaluating these pilot materials by trialling them in schools, after which we hope to develop a full-scale resource based on more objects

[5] In particular, we also consulted with the Eddystone Trust, a sexual health charity based in the south-west region of England. More information can be found here: http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/sexandhistory/sex-and-relationships-education/

and addressing wider themes within sexuality education. Although our teaching resources can be used in conjunction with a museum visit, as we discuss below, we have developed them so that they can also be useful for stand-alone lessons, by providing high-quality photographs of selected historical artefacts from museum collections. These can be printed for the class to consider, or introduced as part of the digital presentations and the high-quality videos provided. (To combat IT-related barriers, the classroom activities also work without these technologies.) An important observation during this project has been the way in which photographs of historical objects are effective in stimulating group discussion. Our use of photographs of objects in our work with young people today has greatly increased our ability to harness the power of this material for much wider impact.

Our particular way of designing the resource was developed to meet a UK setting, where teachers with limited or no training in sexuality education or PSHE are often required to direct sexuality education classes (Ofsted 2013, p. 4, 7). Our consultation work suggested that many teachers have anxieties at the prospect of talking with young people about sex, especially about non-biological themes such as relationships, gender, power, consent, or pornography (see also Blake 2013, p. 37). It was in this set of circumstances that we hoped the distancing technique which the objects provide would be particularly valuable. At the same time, we found it was not immediately obvious to such teachers that bringing images of sexually explicit historical objects into the classroom would help them navigate the difficulties of debating the sensitive, emotional, and personal aspects of sex and relationships, so one of our challenges has been to ensure the resource is as user-friendly and appealing to teachers as possible.

The resource leads teachers step by step through a set of activities which are designed to engage pupils with a particular historical object. Teachers are given guidance in setting up the class and furnished with particular suggested questions to ask. The provision of videos in which academics talk about the objects and the issues raised by them ensures that teachers are not expected to have prior knowledge or expertise in history or historical artefacts. The intention is that teachers find the resource a straightforward, structured, and simple way to teach sexuality education and that it helps them generate and manage the discussion.

We suggest that the teacher begins by showing the image of the object, without explaining what it is; they may prompt the class with questions such as ‘What do you think this was used for?’ or ‘When might it have been made?,’ but should allow some time for the pupils to explore the object themselves. The teacher is then advised to introduce historical information

about the objects gradually, to fuel the discussion, and, as necessary, to direct the conversations towards certain topics in order to fulfil stated learning outcomes.

Our pilot teaching resource speaks to several of the specific recommendations of the Healthy Sexual Development framework developed by international researchers in 2010, and which also match priorities identified for the improvement of sexuality education in the UK. This includes the need for young people to develop the tools to understand the issue of consent and control of one's own sexuality, and also the topic of mediated representations of sex in today's society (McKee et al. 2010; Brook, PSHE Association and Sex Education Forum 2014). Our resource pack consists of suggested classroom activities based around two objects which can engender debates on these particular topics.

The first suggested activity, aimed at UK Key Stages 4 and 5 (14–18), is based around a metal chastity belt, purporting to be of medieval origin (in fact, it was probably made much later) (Fig. 2.1). We use it to address the recommendation that young people should develop an understanding of consent, agency, and control of their own sexuality and body (McKee et al. 2010, p. 16; Brook, PSHE Association and Sex Education Forum 2014, pp. 9–10). After first allowing the class to puzzle over the object independently, the

Fig. 2.1 A metal chastity belt

Fig. 2.2 Chinese ivory figurine: couple embracing

historical information and videos included in the resource pack reveal that such chastity belts were often associated with the control of women during periods when their husbands were away. The teacher is provided with a series of questions that they can then use to structure discussion about the control of sexuality by husbands, parents, society, and so on. In this way, the chastity belt provides a route into productive discussions around consent, trust, sexual control, and power within and outside sexual relationships, and how these are often gendered. The fact that the belt is likely to have been made in the Victorian era as a Medieval 'fake' can facilitate discussion on why these sexual attitudes persist across time.

The second suggested activity within the resource, also aimed at UK Key Stages 4 and 5 (14–18), is based around a small nineteenth-century Chinese ivory figurine showing a semi-naked male and female couple embracing (Fig. 2.2). This object can be used to help young people develop skills in 'understanding' and 'critiquing … mediated representations of sexuality in verbal, visual, and performance media,' as recommended in the Healthy Sexual Development framework (McKee et al. 2010, p. 18). In the adaptation of this framework by UK academics and sexual health practitioners (including representatives from the RSE Hub, Brook, Durham University School of Medicine, Pharmacy and Health, University of Westminster and University of Exeter,) this recommendation is adjusted to 'applying critical analysis to media representations of sex, sexual orientations, relationships, body image, gender and sexual expression.'[6] This corresponds to current guidance produced by key

[6] Retrieved 20 October 2015 from http://www.rsehub.org.uk/media/22180/15-domains-of-healthy-sexual-development-an-overview.pdf

UK agencies that emphasises the importance of addressing these individual topics as they relate to the impact of mediated images in giving young people the tools for negotiating contemporary challenges (Brook, PSHE Association and Sex Education Forum 2014, pp. 10–11).

The suggested activity helps teachers to use the figurine to encourage discussions about intimacy and mutual pleasure between sexual partners, and about how this historical image compares to modern media representations of sexual activity in this regard. These male and female bodies from nineteenth-century China have little gender differentiation, and this can facilitate a discussion about body image, gendered expectations about attractiveness, and again how these relate to mediated representations today. The teacher's guidance also recommends highlighting the fact that the female figure appears to have bound feet and to show the provided video, or deliver the provided historical information, which describes this painful and now illegal practice. This information can be used to think about how specific standards of beauty and expectations about body modification vary across cultures and their visual representations of bodies and sexuality. Furthermore, discussions with the group about whether the object should be described as 'erotica' or 'pornography' or something else can encourage consideration of what constitutes the 'pornographic' today and what type of images we expect see in this genre. Engaging with debates about the historical context in which this object may have been created and used (as the resource explains, it may have been given by a parent to a young woman for educative purposes) encourages consideration of cultural attitudes towards the issue of who should be able to view sexually explicit images and the associated underlying assumptions and implications.

In addition to the discussion of specific topics in class, our resources also address a number of the recommendations of the 2010 Healthy Sexual Development framework about fundamental methodological approaches to sexuality education. First, the framework is based upon a multidisciplinary approach to understanding healthy sexual development (McKee et al. 2010, p. 15). In the UK context, researchers have called for an understanding of young people's 'sexual cultures,' and sexuality education based upon it, to draw on 'insights from different disciplines, but especially those which use methods and approaches that admit the complexity of culture in general and sexual culture in particular, are aware of the shifts and continuities in the way that culture, sex and young people have been viewed historically and make more of the potential for collaborations between academics, other practitioners and young people themselves' (Attwood and Smith 2011, pp. 240–1). Our format employs interdisciplinary research and practice and brings to

sexuality education the approaches and resources of academia, the museum and creative sectors (especially the humanities' insights into the history of human culture), other school subjects, and young people's own input, all of which provide a different dimension to understanding learning and development, sexuality, and the place of sex in society. Second, the framework suggests a 'holistic' approach which develops positive skills and understandings, as opposed to focusing only on preventing abuse and unwanted sexual encounters (McKee et al. 2010, pp. 15–16). Our methods are designed to help young people develop positive understandings of sexuality, for instance by exploring the topic of pleasure, as well as useful, transferable skills such as critical thinking, drawn from other school subjects such as history. Third, the framework suggests traditional pedagogy should be combined with learning through reflection and exploration (McKee et al. 2010, pp. 16–18). The format we have developed is designed to encourage independent thinking and learning by the class and builds on our findings that the objects—as new and intriguing images—are the best way to spark interest and enthusiasm for the session. Our approach is participatory and based around the curious investigation of intriguing objects and their possible meanings, rather than providing definitive answers about history or about sex.

Within Other Tertiary Education Subjects

We have also applied our methodology to the enrichment of learning in other contexts. In collaboration with museums, we have delivered workshops where handling actual museum objects, or viewing photographs of objects, were used as the basis for the development of creative outputs such as devised drama and dance performances, photography exhibitions, composed music and soundscapes, and film production.[7] These artistic creations were inspired by, and further developed, the discussion of and reflection on contemporary sexual issues stimulated by the workshops.

These artistic responses to objects have enriched work done in subjects such as ethics and philosophy, history, drama, or media arts. An example project involved work with a local college A Level drama class (16–18) who were staging the ancient Greek play *Lysistrata,* which enacts the story of a sex-strike by the women of Athens and Sparta as a protest against the war between their cities.[8] We arranged museum visits and workshops using photographs

[7] More information and examples of the creative work produced in this project can be found here: http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/sexandhistory/ An evaluation report of activities from 2011–2013 is available for download from this web page.

[8] This was a collaboration with the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), Exeter, and Exeter College.

of objects. The class worked with ancient artefacts from Classical Greece, the time the play was first performed, as well as from other periods in history. For instance, we looked at images found on Greek pots depicting sexual encounters between men and women that academics have argued were created exclusively for the 'male gaze,' and which often show violence and degradation enacted on women by men (Richlin 1992). The group discussed the way in which these images call into question the extent of the empowerment and autonomy of the women in the play, especially over their own sexuality, ideas which are sometimes identified as feminist tropes by modern commentators. Through this engagement, students developed new interpretations of the sexual themes within the play and rethought their understanding of its connection with twenty-first-century debates about patriarchy, feminism, and expectations of gender roles around sexual initiative and political power.

In other projects, students wrote and performed powerful dance and drama pieces in response to sessions with various objects.[9] For instance, one group of young women devised and performed a play in response to their discussions about a small comical statuette of Priapus (a garden gnome with a giant phallus) which would have been on open display in a home in ancient Pompeii, where it originated; through the story of the relationship between an adolescent girl and her grandmother, they explored issues relating to intergenerational advice about sex, anxieties associated with sexual awakening, a young girl's fears about sexual violation, and sex education. Two young men also responded to images of sexual intercourse between younger and older males on the ancient Roman silver goblet known as 'the Warren Cup' by devising a moving dance about power play within homosexual relationships.

While the students in these activities were working towards qualifications in, for instance, creative or performing arts,[10] for their schools and colleges it was clear that working with us also fulfilled personal and social development requirements of the institution. There are no statutory requirements for sexuality education in tertiary education (ages 16–18) in the UK; however, many schools and colleges include personal development, including sexuality education, as part of their teaching policies. One music teacher we worked with told us:

> We have to deliver certain SRE targets in college and we use college tutorials … [but] it's hard. This provided a new way of meeting these requirements. (Rev Hammer, Exeter Academy of Music and Sound)

[9] This was part of a project in collaboration with RAMM, Exeter; Exeter College; Academy of Music and Sound, Exeter; West Exe College Technology; and Exeter Foyer, a homeless charity.

[10] For instance, the UK BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma in Performing Arts.

Out-of-School Youth Activities and Programmes, in Particular for Disadvantaged Youth

We have also applied the methodology as the basis of long-term, nurturing projects with young people, especially those experiencing difficulties in their lives. In this, we have worked in collaboration with museums, youth workers, young people's charities, and local authority sexual health and education sectors. This has reached a demographic of young people that the museums and heritage sector typically struggles to engage meaningfully.

A successful instance of this type of activity took place in collaboration with a dynamic arts company and a local museum, in which we created a long-term programme for young people in Plymouth, UK—a city which has low cultural engagement and a high level of economic deprivation.[11] This involved groups of young people aged 14–18 who were receiving support to gain some basic qualifications and re-access education, employment, or training; or those who regularly attended an LGBT support group; or who were learning English as a second language, including economic migrants and refugees. The young participants discussed historical objects and their relevance for their own lives in workshops with other young people, and with older people, using the objects as a focus for challenging intergenerational dialogue about relationships, sexuality, gender, and expectations. They then used activities such as dressing-up games, photographic assignments, choreographic tasks, and drama exercises to engage further with the ideas inspired by the exploration of the historical objects. Finally, they worked with professional artists to produce high-quality films based on the narratives and performances developed in the workshops.

The long-term evaluation of this project showed the particular value of our methodology for engaging at risk or disadvantaged young people, for developing their social confidence, and for enabling them to explore difficult issues in a safe environment. The distancing technique which the historical objects provide, as discussed above, proved especially valuable when working with these groups. In this context, the objects provided a 'psychological and emotional space' on to which participants could project their own 'fears, worries, hopes, and dreams' more safely (Malone 2013, p. 20). The feeling of recognition and familiarity which historical objects evoke about shared human experience was also of particular benefit for these young people,

[11] The 'Lust in Translation' project was organised with Effervescent arts' company; Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery; City College, Plymouth; Plymouth Youth Service, Age UK, Plymouth; Plymouth Befrienders Service and Groundwork South West.

who gained a sense of belonging or empowerment which they did not get through other pedagogic experiences (Malone 2013, pp. 20–21). Object-based working practices were also an advantage for participants who found communication through usual spoken language formalities challenging, including not only the group of young people with English as a Second Language, but also groups of young people who had recently experienced emotional and physical hardship or violence. Our exploratory and participatory approach also suited those participants who struggled with traditional educational requirements for 'right' answers (Malone 2013, pp. 9–10).

As in the case of our work in formal educational settings, the activities were perceived as supporting fundamental areas of personal and social development for the young participants of the project. As the evaluation report described:

> [the participants] have few opportunities to talk about sex in a holistic and sensitive way … the young people approached the subject in a more philosophical way; they were using higher levels of analysis than they would do in our standard activities about sexual health and relationships. (Malone 2013, p. 21)

The evaluation found that this project had enriched the lives of the participants, ameliorated some of the effects of structural disadvantages, and provided a sustained transformation in future opportunities and personal well-being. As the report describes:

> The participants' engagement with objects enabled them to make more sense of their own (sometimes chaotic or traumatic) lives and their wider communities and society. It enriched their own lives and ameliorated some of the effects of structural disadvantage … [the project] clearly demonstrated that the power of museum objects and collections lies in working collaboratively and creatively with people to help them make sense of what can seem a chaotic reality, of who they are and who they want to be, and to move forward in those plans through developing skills and making new connections. (Malone 2013, p. 3)

For instance, participants gained important skills in critical thinking and communication, as well as increased employability with technical skills in creative outputs. The Arts Council, UK, has showcased this particular project as a model for using the arts to enhance health and well-being (Malone 2013, p. 19).

Museums, Exhibitions, and Participation Programmes

We have also worked with museums on the reinterpretation of collections in exhibitions and as part of their youth-focused outreach programmes, as a way of engaging young people with our approach. One example has been the

curation of a major exhibition with a local city museum, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) in Exeter.[12] This showcased many of the sexually related artefacts we have worked with in other settings, including the erotic mirror-box, the carved clamshell, the chastity belt, and couple figurine, as well as other materials from across time and place that displayed some of the vast variety of ways in which sex and sexuality have been approached by different cultures. This exhibition and its related participation programme were designed to promote public thought and debate about sex. Exhibition panels posed questions of visitors, challenging them to think about historical and contemporary values and attitudes towards such issues as censorship and display, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and pleasure and power relations. With the museum, we organised public talks and events for targeted groups in which we explored the sex and sexual representations we encountered in the galleries and the relevance of these for our lives today. The success of this exhibition in engaging our audience and stimulating their productive reflection on sexuality today was indicated by the feedback we captured from visitors. Feedback from those in the 14–25 age bracket[13] suggests this was another effective medium for provoking open discussion with young people around sex. Once again, feedback from the exhibition indicated that young people are inspired by the realisation (or confirmation) that sex has been a subject of interest in many past cultures, and that this empowers them. Furthermore, several young respondents in particular reflected on the value of the objects as educational material for them and their peers:

> Very interesting to see [sex] displayed, and hopefully it can become a more comfortable and educated topic, especially in young people. (Anonymous, 17)

> [I am] interested in the way artefacts have been used to provoke questions. I like that practices surrounding sex are viewed as constructed and that this has been developed over history. I am very excited about how to could be implemented in the curriculum. (Anonymous, 24)

This visitor feedback also suggested that children aged 13 and under engaged with the exhibition and its themes (the exhibition and supporting publicity included warnings about the sexual nature of its content). A lively debate between visitors on feedback cards indicated differences in public

[12] 'Intimate Worlds: Exploring Sexuality through the Wellcome Collection' was organised in conjunction with RAMM, Exeter, and Science Museum, London. It was curated by the authors with Tony Eccles at RAMM. More information can be found here: http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/sexandhistory/intimate-worlds-exhibition/. When the exhibition was on, the use of the schools-based sexuality education resource discussed above was enhanced by visits to this exhibition.

[13] With the caveat that in written feedback some visitors may not have given their age accurately.

opinion over whether younger children should be able to see such a display. These responses will be useful if and when we consider how the methodology might or should be applicable for work with younger children.

In other projects, we have involved young people as curators and designers of participatory programmes. We employed this model in a series of exhibitions we organised with another city museum in the UK, Royal Museum of Cornwall, Truro, working in collaboration with a local college and young women's charity.[14] It was intended that the youth-led format would allow, as far as possible, the young people to identify the sexually related issues that the project should explore. Allowing them to contribute to the selection of objects ensured that the young people were able to work with material which they saw as especially relevant to their own concerns and to those of their peer group. This project employed creative responses as a means of reinterpreting the objects, in order to deepen the engagement with the historical material. The resulting outputs, such as video installations, contemporary crafts, scrapbooks, photography, and art installations were displayed within the exhibitions. For instance, one 17-year-old female participant chose a 'Sowei mask,' originating from the culture of the Mende people of Sierra Leone. The mask was made to be worn by senior members of the all-female Sande Society during rite-of-passage ceremonies that signified a girl's transition to adulthood, and it features carved expressions of local ideals of feminine beauty and health. The student created a scrapbook in response to the object, in which she presented the results of oral histories created by interviewing members of her family across generations, exploring what it has meant to be a teenager throughout the twentieth century and today, and in particular the way girls prepare for social roles in our society, and changing ideals of feminine beauty and attractiveness.

The feedback from the participants in this project suggested that they felt the experience had enriched their understanding of their own ideas about sexuality, gender, relationships, and especially of their own development into adulthood. As one described:

> We found it inspirational. … The historical objects opened our minds to new ideas. It made us more mature in the way we thought about sex. We all discovered things about ourselves. (Anonymous, 17)

[14] The 'Revealing Collections' exhibitions were organised with Royal Museum of Cornwall, University College Falmouth, Truro College, and Platform 51, a young women's charity.

In addition, the exhibitions the young people curated, as well as the events they organised such as talks and gallery trails, acted as a catalyst for further debate by the general public, including other young people. The feedback collected from visitors to these exhibitions and associated events illustrates the ways in which these creative interpretations of the objects were able to inspire discussion and debate about contemporary attitudes to sexually related topics. One 16-year-old visitor recognised the relevance of the historical material for their own life and saw the exhibition as a tool for thinking through, in particular, sexual identity, attitudes to homosexuality, and the way in which young people learn about sex in our society:

> When you are gay everything is hush hush and taboo … [it is] reassuring, that there is something here that people can actually learn from and not have to go home and google stuff and then delete their history. … Often what you go to see in a museum … bears no relevance to anything in modern life … you want people to be able to learn things and take them away and apply them to their lives. (Anonymous, 16)

A third-party report of this project concluded that it improved the young participants' knowledge, confidence, and critical thinking skills around sex in our society, and broader skills, such as decision making. It also made an impact on future careers for some participants, for instance those who decided to pursue careers in the cultural sector. The Royal Cornwall Museum reported a change in approaches to working with young people and especially in the confidence of its staff in using its collections to tackle sensitive issues. Our work has, therefore, opened up opportunities for the further development of sexuality education in museum settings.

Future Plans and Developments

The work described here represents the initial stages of what we hope will be a long-term, continuously evolving project which develops a variety of applications of our core methodology with multiple partners across the world, applying it to new contexts within which we can further promote healthy sexual development through engagement with historical objects.

The sexuality education teaching resource currently exists only as a small-scale pilot resource drawing on just two key objects. In the short term, we plan to revise and develop the resource further on the basis of an evaluation of this pilot and to adapt our approach to a number of different models currently

adopted by schools in the UK and internationally. This includes the delivery of lessons in-house by the schools' own teachers. Although our methodology has been designed to be easy to use by those without historical expertise, in developing a full-scale set of resources for school teachers, we would want to follow best practice guidance and offer, or arrange for, teacher training which ensures that our users have at least basic competencies around delivering sexuality education (Brook, PSHE Association and Sex Education Forum 2014, p. 13). We also intend to develop our offerings to include bespoke programmes in which our facilitators would deliver sessions for schools, if possible in collaboration with an established supplier, such as Brook in the UK.

We have identified many objects with great potential for further school resources, which could provoke discussions of new themes and concerns, speak to particular audiences, and enable us to expand the age ranges that we can target (e.g. to reach younger school pupils under the age of 12). We are keen to harness the power of historical objects to address particularly difficult and sensitive topics such as female genital mutilation (FGM) or abusive relationships. The challenges of tackling such areas are not to be underestimated; historical objects from other cultures bring to the fore some of the tensions between cross-cultural tolerance and the risks associated with cultural relativism, and this is an issue of particular concern, for example, in objects that relate to the practice of FGM (Burrage 2015, pp. 16–17). Yet it is this sharp focus, combined with the historical context for discussion, which can help overcome some of the problems frequently faced in attempts to engender productive conversations about such topics in the classroom. The future development of our work will embrace these challenges, and we are determined to develop ways of using historical material, even when it depicts sexual situations that reflect gendered oppression, unequal power relationships, patriarchal structures, or relationships that we would view as abusive. We should not shy away from using, for example, ancient Greek images of homosexual activity, even though such depictions reveal the importance of age differentials in the past. Using such images in discussions regarding paedophilia, unequal power relations, or the ways in which relationships between individuals of different ages can frequently become abusive is challenging and requires careful handling, but is nonetheless important in the construction of an approach to sexuality education which seeks to equip young people for the difficult social challenges they face.

In particular, we are committed to expanding our work to include a much broader range of objects which help schools develop sexuality education programmes which value sexual and gender diversity. Our methodology can be effective in not marginalising LGBT experience as outside of the mainstream or

as an area of special interest, for example through highlighting the historically contingent nature of contemporary heterosexual privilege. A Greek pot showing sex between two male figures, or a painting of men dressed as women in an eighteenth-century 'molly-house' (tavern) provides a point of engagement for all pupils to think about issues of sexual and gender diversity and the politics of inclusion and exclusion. In this way, our project supports activities which seek both to equip all pupils' sexual development, whatever sexual identities they express, and to ensure that all pupils are made aware of the issues of sexual and gender diversity, recognise instances of heterosexual privilege, and question aspects of heterosexism (see Meyer 2009). These issues require well-facilitated discussion; but well-designed and well-delivered engagement with historical objects can provide an exemplary way to manage and confront such ideas.

We are planning to develop our work with museums into a more sustained and focused dialogue with school-based sexuality education work. We are developing long-term collaborations with museums in Europe and the USA on the creation of displays and engagement tools (trails, handling collections, and 'smart' reproductions of our objects) that would be used as part of school visits. We intend to develop partnerships with artists and specialists in technology and design in the development of innovative, interactive tools and mechanisms that enhance people's engagement with objects that may be too fragile or precious to touch, or that might benefit from virtual cues to bring the debates surrounding their meaning and purpose to life.

We have come to understand that the key strength of our approach, in every setting or context, lies precisely in the fact that it does not offer traditional sexuality education lessons, though it still is able to cover a wide range of topics relating to healthy sexual development. The objects' ability to create a historical distance, the context of creative activities inspired by the objects, or the setting of a school trip to a museum to see a collection greatly reduce the stigma and reluctance around talking with other young people and in front of adults that are often associated with sexuality education. As one young participant commented after a workshop: 'I think people spoke about things that they wouldn't normally talk about, without realising it.' The young people, teachers, youth workers, and health professionals we have worked with have frequently been surprised by how much young people open up about sex during our sessions. One young person we have worked with has suggested: 'it didn't feel like a sex ed thing.' Our work with historical objects has found that the most effective way to address sexuality education is precisely not to package it explicitly or exclusively as such, but to embed it within other learning, activities, or contexts.

Acknowledgement The authors are grateful for financial and other support provided by AHRC, ESRC, MLA, Wellcome Collection, and the Wellcome Trust.

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