Museum Studies - Using a Mock Auction as a Teaching Device

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One of the fascinating aspects of the British contemporary museum scene is the complicated (not to say Byzantine) interlocking nature of the competing Collections Policies of our major institutions. An outsider might imagine that the divisions and boundaries of the major collections were based on rational principles. But closer inspection reveals that precedent is far more important than logic in building up the collections of the great museums.   This is an important issue in a Museums Studies course not only to explain the importance of Collections Policies to direct the future development of Museums but also for students to be able to understand what particular museums actually do i.e. trying to get them to see beyond the 'mission statements' which obscure their real institutional aims and objectives.

To give a couple of examples. If one wanted to donate an important painting to the Nation which institution would be appropriate. Should it go to the National? Tate Britain?, or perhaps the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). Or depending on context it might find a home in other museums like the Wallace Collection, the Sir John Soane Museum or the Museum of London. The National might claim it as the home of European Paintings from 1300 – 1900; the Tate Britain would hope it would rest in the Museum dedicated to the best of British Artists, but if it were a water colour it would belong in the home of the national collection of Watercolours in the V&A.   The divisions between the V&A and the British Museum (BM) are particularly intertwined.   One might think that the BM collects 'Ancient' and Medieval material while the V&A collects Renaissance and later decorative arts, but it is by no means that simple   – an object of one type of one date would go to the BM while an object of another type but the same date would go to the V&A. Clocks, for example, tend to be in the BM while the V&A has a great medieval pottery collection. Both museums have Roman material in their collections, both have Islamic and Far Eastern Collections. The collections mesh together like cogs in a crazy lopsided wheel. A statue of Hermes found in Ancient Rome would find a home in the British Museum while if it were 16th Century it would end up in the V&A.

Previously I have taught this by examining collections policies documents, mission statements, departmental structure and map guides to provide the necessary insight – but it seemed like a hard slog to get the students involved in arcane discussion of hierarchies and the boundaries between collections – so I was looking for something more immediate and more interactive. I used to think up examples of objects and tell the students which museums would be interested in the object and which museum would probably end up getting the object if it came onto the market. This ad hoc teaching method suggested to me that I could turn it into an Auction with students representing museums bidding for a variety of objects. The structure of the Auction was as follows:

I assigned some students to be officers of 2 trusts - one the Heritage Lottery Fund, the other a private foundation of the son or daughter of a billionaire variety - a sort of Clore/Sainsbury/Fairbairn/Getty type fund.

I allocated each of the rest of the students a museum. The museums I choose were the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the Wallace Collection, Tate Britain, National Gallery, Museum of London, and the Cuming Museum. I made the choice to maximise the overlap in collections and to highlight some of the power relationships issues between local, regional and national museums.

I assigned each museum an annual Collections Budget which was set very, very roughly in line with real budgets - although I did not worry too much about absolute accuracy - the most important issue was the relative spends. (BM, V&A and National £2m, Tate Britain £1.2m, Wallace £0.5m, Museum of London (£0.2m); Cuming Museum (Museum of Southwark) – £20k). I then gave them

details of a list of objects that were for sale. The objects were invented but similar to objects with which they could be compared and chosen to make sure a number of museums would be competing for each object and to provide objects for a variety of values.   I took the role of Auctioneer and assigned each object a guide price. The list is below.

The museums had to choose the objects they wanted for their museums based on the Collections Policy and the role of their museum although the students own preferences had something of an influence as well.   Having made a short list the students then had to try and augment their own spending budget with grants from the 2 grant bodies. This they did by direct negotiation – the Grants had their own table at the top of the Room and seemed to quite enjoy their sense of power over the suppliants their fellow students! (on other occasions the negotiations took place over an extended coffee break in the Student Cafeteria.)

I allocated the grant bodies a reasonable amount of money (£6m to HLF and £4m to the Private Foundation) to distribute but not enough to satisfy everyone and told them to restrict the number of grants they gave to
> 2 grants £1m - £2m
> 2 grants   £0.5m - £1m
> 1 grant under £500,000
> One grant under £100,000
> One grant under £50,000
> and one grant under £20,000.

They were asked to make up their own grant giving criteria. Of course I told the HLF they had to act appropriately to a public sector body while hinted to the Private Foundation that they could be more idiosyncratic in their distribution.

The session was set up as follows.
> 1. Tutor gives description of the auction game
> 2. List of objects revealed
> 3. Time for museums to consider selection of objects
> 4. Period of negotiations between museums and Grant giving bodies
> 5. Open auction
> 6. Discussion of Results

The result was definitely good fun - so much so that the teaching session overran by some 30 minutes and nobody noticed. The auction definitely helped provide insight into the differing priorities of the various museum collections - and the competitive nature of the grant giving system.

At the end each museum reported back on what it had won and lost and the grant bodies reported on their decision making. We went through the list of objects and discussed what would probably have happened in real life – we discussed those cases where museums had made inappropriate bids or had failed to bid for one of their prime objects. However, all the students had acted fairly sensibly although the British Museum did have to be told that in real life it was quite unlikely that the BM would have been quite so merciless to its smaller rivals!

The following week we had a discussion of the auction and came up with the following suggestions and feedback.

All students thought the session had been useful, interesting and enjoyable. They confirmed that the session helped them understand the importance of Collections Policies and why museums had different priorities. They thought the range of museums was about right but suggested a local element should be included in the mix. They felt the position of the grant giving bodies had been highlighted by the auction. They preferred the interaction of the open bidding system to a sealed bid system and felt that the relative size of the budgets had been appropriate.

I put to the students the suggestion that it might be developed by being set the week before, with a written catalogue of objects for sale. The students could then research their museum and its collections policies for themselves while at the same time researching the objects. The grant giving bodies would research their policies and establish their own set of criteria. In the week leading up to the Auction negotiations between museums and grant giving bodies could continue by email and meeting.

After the auction each student would give a short presentation of their museum's collections policy.

In conclusion, the Auction gave the students a real feel for the different criteria each museum had for its collections, and an understanding of the need to be precise about what a museum might or might not purchase. The need for cooperation between museums was highlighted. In the event only one museum came away with nothing and this was the smallest museum with the littlest budget and no friends on the grant giving bodies. We all felt that this was a realistic outcome and an important lesson to learn.

The objects on sale were:

Celtic Helmet found in the Thames at London Bridge	£0.5m
Astrolabe used by Geoffrey Chaucer	£1m
Pottery inscribed in Latin 'used at Temple of Mithras'	£25,000
Pot found in Southwark marked 'Achillia the Gladiatrix'	£15,000
Dug out Canoe found in River Neckinger. Bermondsey	£20,000
A set of Chinese Armour brought back by Lord McCartney's Expedition	£0.5m
Early Hollar engraving of City of London made from Southwark Cathedral	£20,000
Sevres Porcelain Elephant Clock made for Madame Pompidou and once owned by Mr Henry Cuming	£30,000
A newly discovered Watercolour of the Fighting Temeraire by Turner	£1m
Illustrated poem of Jerusalem by William Blake	£1m
Joshua Reynolds 'Portrait of a Sad Girl'	£2m
Joshua Reynolds 'Portrait of the Tahitian Omai visiting Bedlam	£5m
Thomas Lawrence 'Portrait of George VI'	£1m
Islamic tile 10th Century	£20,000
Buddhist Statue 15th Century	£0.5m

I have a feeling quite a good board game could be made out of it!