

A brief guide for creating publically engaged outward-facing assessment opportunities

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About this guide

This document is the result of a UCL Connected Curriculum Co-Lab collaboration between Students Noah Shepherd and Mabel Moll and Dr Thomas Kador, UCL Culture, with support from Professor Helen Chatterjee (UCL BioSciences), Lizzy Baddeley and Georgia Pitts (UCL Public Engagement Unit). It is compiled from recommendations that the students drew up based on their review of the outward-facing components of two exiting UCL Modules; BAsc2001 Object Lessons and BIOLM018 Vertebrate Life and Evolution. The key concern of the students' research and hence this document has been to provide outward-facing assessment opportunities that work with real (rather than notional) public audiences and/or community partners.

Working with real not notional audiences

Our experience suggests that students struggle with producing nominally public-facing outputs targeted at notional (i.e. imagined) audiences. Consequently, if the public-facing element of the module is considered an important element it would be important to create opportunities for students to engage directly with public audiences and/or community partners. These engagement can vary in scale and frequency depending on the nature of the anticipated learning outcomes and the desired assessable outputs. It may be appropriate to simply have a simple in-class meeting with an invited group of 'guests' or a one-off excursion to a school or community project to get students thinking about producing a fairly straightforward output (like a poster, presentation or website) aimed at a specific audience. However, for modules that foresee a more intensive engagement with the public benefit of academic research a more long term and ongoing relationship may be desirable.

Establishing and maintaining relationships with public audiences/partners

It is important to acknowledge that setting up public-facing student projects is a process that at best occurs over longer periods of time in order to be successful and thus their development may require multiple student cohorts. The key advice here is to foster long term collaborations with community groups, particularly in ways that encourage mutual trust. It takes time for academic partners and community groups to get to know the rhythms, routines and activities of the other group.

In order to sustain a long term relationship, modules can benefit from partnering with external institutions which either provide or act as the external audience. Several UCL modules/courses already have such partnerships with industry or policy institutions. However, this option is more relevant to certain courses where corresponding institutions would want to be involved. This raises the key question, how do the community partners benefit from the relationship?

A mutually beneficial relationship

For any partner, it is important to create a two-way relationship where both sides benefit. Consequently it is key to identify the added value for any prospective partnership. In this context is vital that everyone clearly states their objectives and expectations from the outset of the process. This means being direct with any potential partner about the opportunities and risks associated with the project so that risks and benefits can be shared as equally as possible. Moreover it is important not to promise outcomes that may be unrealistic or aspirational and also not to ask for too much time.

A related challenge of working with communities is the fixed time-scale of the academic year. Time scales cannot always be predicted as engagement processes often have their own dynamic, no matter the level of planning, therefore meticulous project monitoring and flexible management is paramount.

Preparing and supporting students adequately for working with community partners

The engagements between students and community groups need to be planned and structured in advance in order to prepare our students and not to generate burdens to community partners. Some of the key discussion to be held with students include ethics and methodologies. In turn community partners need to be informed about the potential limitations and of the students' engagement. In other words expectation need to be managed on all sides from the very outset of any collaborations.

After the initial preparation it is vital that students receive adequate ongoing support, and that there is a clear feedback loop in place as well as transparent and clearly defined three way communication channels between the student, academic staff and the community partner.

Incorporating Public Participation within Learning and Assessment

There can often be a certain tension between university assessment and projects which incorporate public facing elements. Generally, university assessment rewards individual excellence whereas public facing projects often rely on co-operation, dialogue and teamwork. Hence it is vital to consider guidelines for effective group and teamwork, in relation to assessed work, provided [elsewhere](#). More specifically to public engagements, benefits to the community are frequently difficult to measure therefore assessment criteria need to be flexible in order to accommodate and reward quite diverse learning agendas. Several existing community-facing modules resolve this by asking students to produce a personal reflection, addressing the most important issues in relation to participation and engagement with community partners. Students are then assessed on their ability to reflect on the process, rather than on the quality of the relationship as this is sometimes out of their control. However, other models exist that directly incorporate a research or creative project or a consultant report produced by students, or even co-produced between students and community partners, into formal assessment.

On a related note it is also important to consider the merits and possibility to involve the public audience in the assessment project by marking or qualitatively assessing the produced outputs and/or the students' ongoing contribution to the project.

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