

Knowledgeboard: MLA / Sparknow KTP report launch event

“When we change the way we look at things, the things we look at change”: A fresh perspective on Museums, Libraries and Archives – next steps in Knowledge Transfer.

Think about your favourite museum library or archive then tell the person sitting next to you why it made an impact on you?

This was a question posed to a cross section of Londoners as part of a research project undertaken by Sparknow with Museums, Libraries and Archives, London (MLAL) to look at mobilising the knowledge base in museums, libraries and archives: what is there and how it can benefit business.

It provoked a meaningful and warm response from almost everyone that we approached. People value heritage its just that they often don't realise why or how those values can be transferred to a business environment.

This May at an event in Washington, MLAL in the shape of Ellen Collins and Sparknow in the shape of Victoria Ward led a workshop in which they presented the research, the method and the findings to a group of interested change and knowledge management practitioners.

I was one of those to whom the “favourite Museum....” question was posed. I plumped for the Living Desert in Palm Desert California and The Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.



The Living Desert has space, lots of it. It is a quiet reflective almost timeless space that I often go back to in my mind when planning assignments. And I try and build reflection space and gestation time into the work we at Sparknow do.

Vienna houses many of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's most famous works. I never tire of his paintings: he is a visual storyteller portraying the progress of the seasons of the year and the rustic activities associated with them during the 16th Century in The Netherlands. So much of our work does encompass visual images, anecdotes and associated narrative.



Subliminally perhaps those two diverse institutions have had an impact on the way we go about our business.

The project arose from previous work undertaken by MLAL looking at the

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economic impact of museums, libraries and archives, beginning as an enquiry into the so-called “knowledge economy” but developing into something bigger, messier and much more interesting.

Undertaken as a narrative enquiry it generated some fascinating insights into the relationships between the sector and business. By collecting and analysing people’s stories and experiences, we were able to develop a relevant and in-depth understanding of the ways that museums, libraries and archives do, and could, work with businesses.

As the project unfolded it became apparent that many people had experienced similar “eureka” moments they could trace back to a visit to one of the capital’s many museums libraries and archives. And the savvy ones had attempted to incorporate the legacy into their day-to-day business.

It was entirely appropriate that the chosen venue for the launch of the findings and the set of pilot projects funded by London Development Agency (LDA) should be a John Lewis Partnership firm, Peter Jones. Their archives are being used extensively: including the induction of new staff and recently to inform the design of a new John Lewis store in Leicester.

Designers were looking for a simple, abstract pattern, but even they were surprised when they finally chose one dating from 1803, which reflected Leicester’s textile heritage. The pattern

was then digitally redrawn, then transferred onto glass panels. At night it’ll be subtly illuminated from within, so that it’ll glow like a lantern.

The design had been on loan at the Victoria & Albert Museum, along with several hundred others for the past forty years. It’s just returned to the John Lewis Partnership Textile Archive, where it’s housed with some 25,000 other exhibits.

At the launch event on September 17th Tom Campbell of the LDA drew upon a survey they had carried out into why London had become such a Mecca for the fashion world. The prime motivation for being located in London wasn’t the cosmopolitan lifestyle, the increasingly good cuisine and the transport system; it was the Victoria & Albert Museum – considered pre-eminent as a home of traditional and contemporary fabrics and designs.

Throughout the Findings report numerous additional examples of good practice are examined and a set of 3 tier “Next Steps” proposed.

The Pilot projects (Tier 1) fall into two broad programmes of work: one for museums and archives, and one for libraries. At the heart of each is an individual – the bridge builder – who will guide the work, building partnerships and developing relationships that can last beyond the timescale and scope of the work.

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The library programme's focus is on equipping Modern Local Business Libraries to become pioneers of improved business support services and to develop accredited information literacy training programmes for delivery to business people.

An exchange programme between businesses and MLAL sector professionals based on the success of the programmes run by higher education knowledge services will seek to expand the thinking about possible knowledge transfer. An innovation fund is to be established for museums and archives which have an idea for developing a business offer.

Tier 2 projects address Partnerships and communicating across a wide variety of platforms the value of the MLAL resource to business.

Tier 3 entitled "Spillovers, arguments and wide changes" are deemed part of a longer term campaign of provocation, conversation and engagement and potentially the next round of pilot projects.

Of particular value we hope to Knowledgeboard practitioners is the Methodology booklet that provides a comprehensive insight into how MLAL and Sparknow used narrative enquiry to conduct the research and run the Advisory Group that oversaw the project.

The Pilot Projects will be starting in 2009: it is our intention to keep

Knowledgeboard informed of progress and moreover to seek your active support and ideas.

For a copy of "Findings", "Methodology" and "Pilot projects" please go to: <http://MLA.sparknow.net/phase1/report>

We would also encourage you to visit the project blog and contribute to the debate: <http://MLA.sparknow.net/>

To keep up with Sparknow's thinking on how the lessons learned from this narrative enquiry are being applied in other assignments to: www.sparknow.net

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