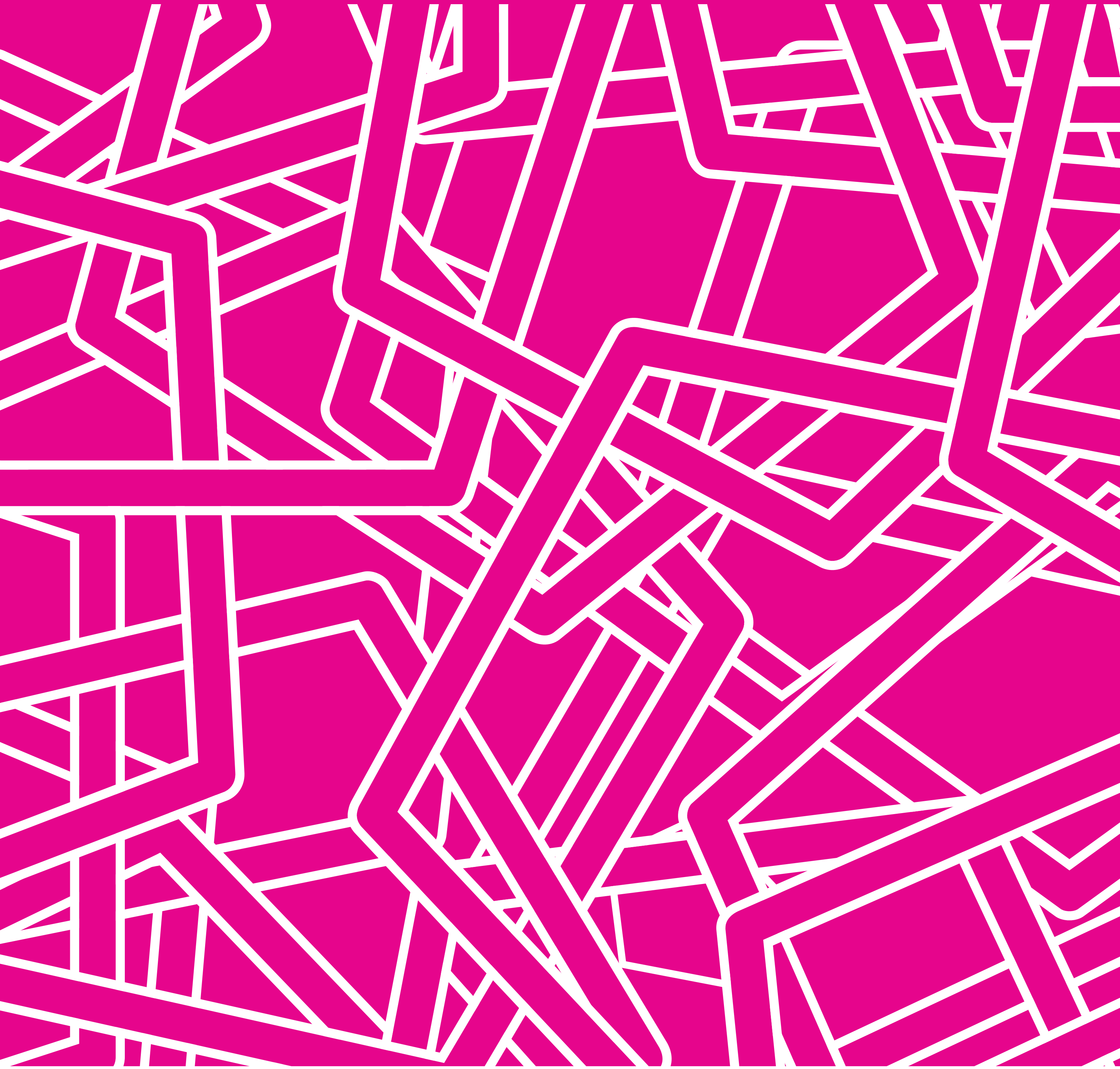
MLA London Knowledge Transfer Programme

2. Methodology



MUSEUMS, LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES
LONDON

Knowledge transfer: a narrative enquiry

The MLA London Knowledge Transfer Programme is an innovative study of the current and potential relationships between London's businesses and its museums, libraries and archives.

It is intended to break new ground and find new ways of looking but we have taken care to locate the research within the context of knowledge transfer and business innovation, and the study set out thinking of the museums, libraries and archives sector as a knowledge base that could be used to help businesses develop in a more innovative way.

As well as being written into a report, the research findings have been used to develop a series of pilot project interventions that we believe will support the development of relationships between museums, libraries and archives and businesses in London.

The diagram below is an excerpt from the original project plan, showing in overview the level and distribution of effort over the life of the project. Funding timetables meant that we were allowed a total period of only five months.

The research was commissioned by MLA London as a development of its 2005 report, London's Culture Equation. The funding came from the London Development Agency (LDA) and MLA London. The research was conducted by Sparknow, managed by a project team of staff from MLA London and the LDA, and overseen by an advisory group, of which more below.

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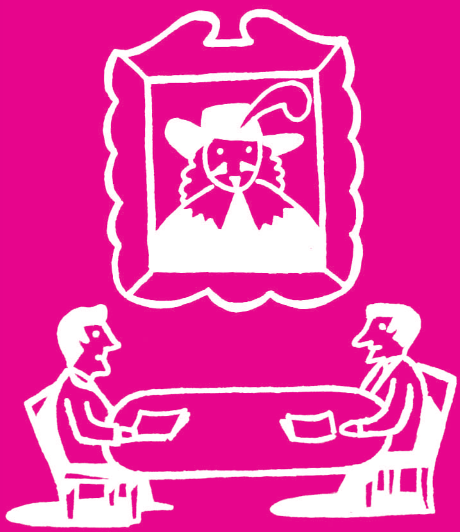
Locating the research



Knowledge transfer and the knowledge economy are increasingly important concepts for understanding and promoting business innovation and development. This is particularly true in London, which is a natural centre for cutting-edge, knowledge intensive businesses, but the terms themselves are amorphous, woolly and liable to be appropriated by different groups for their own purposes.

The Knowledge Transfer Programme is a continuation of the work begun by the MLA London report London's Culture Equation.

We have looked to the literature and practice:

1. As the Work Foundation's 2006 report *Defining the Knowledge Economy* makes clear, there is no universal understanding of the term 'knowledge economy'. Some definitions rely on the commercial application of knowledge in developing business processes and products. Others, such as the EU's Lisbon Strategy, picture a knowledge society where most economic activity depends on individuals having the necessary knowledge-gathering and manipulation skills.

2. Some work already undertaken in the museums, libraries and archives sector falls into the latter definition of the knowledge economy. The sector's role in basic skills development has been investigated (see, for example, MLA London's 2004 research *Londoners Need to Read*, and *Londoners Still Need to Read* from 2008). Other work has even begun to frame this within the context of the knowledge economy – for example, the Local Futures report *Public Libraries in the Knowledge Economy.*

3. However, the role of museums, libraries and archives in the more business-focused aspects of the knowledge economy has not been examined to any significant degree. The sector's work in providing information or knowledge to business has been the subject of some tentative enquiries; however, these are largely unpublished because of problems with data. It is very difficult to collect systematically information on business users, particularly because in many instances their relationship with the knowledge base is subject to confidentiality agreements. This is in addition to the well-known problems with collecting data on any kinds of user in the museums, libraries and archives sector.

4. In local development the term knowledge transfer is usually found in the context of the post technology-transfer ambitions and activities of higher education in relation to business: commercialising their own research or education activities, or seeking partnerships with business which will in some way generate new products, services and income. A good example would be the deal between Siemens and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) to provide cultural sensitisation training to staff who are going to work in Asia.

   This quite particular definition of knowledge transfer implies a formal exchange between institutions, built upon the assumption that directly traceable economic benefits result from the 'transfer'. (It also implies a particularly market-based understanding of the value of knowledge: we will not discuss this at length here, but wish to highlight that choosing such an understanding has important implications.)

"Within a modern, knowledge driven economy, knowledge transfer is about transferring good ideas, research results and skills between universities, other research organisations, business and the wider community to enable innovative new products and services to be developed."

Knowledge Transfer from the Research Base

DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS ENTERPRISE AND REGULATORY REFORM

"At its simplest, knowledge transfer is about starting a conversation. This may be with a colleague from a university or a chance meeting with a researcher at a professional seminar you have attended. As in all good conversations, knowledge transfer is a two way process.

It's about being open to learning from others as well as sharing your ideas and experiences. By creating a dialogue between the research community and research users, knowledge transfer will help get research applied in policy and practice."

Introduction to Knowledge Transfer

ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

It was agreed early on by our advisory group that to restrict our enquiry to the knowledge-as-commodity view would lead us to ignore some of the more intangible inspirations, innovations and exchanges of ideas that emerge from contact with museums, libraries and archives.

Some of these are paid for and traceable, but others have benefits that may be less easy to track and may even take a long time to emerge. We also agreed to uncouple the term from the institutional assumption, considering the role that museums, libraries and archives can play in individual professional journeys as well as those of whole organisations.

5. This broadening of remit has allowed us to enquire into the ways in which museums, libraries and archives can support knowledge transfer and, particularly, innovation in organisations by offering the space and time that is coming to be recognised as necessary to innovative behaviour (Scott and Bruce, 1994).

Likewise, an engagement with culture can contribute to the 'climate' that encourages individual innovation. Nissley and Casey (2002) cite the example of a corporate museum in America which displays an enormous mirror – the biggest that had been cast by the company to that point. It is cracked in one corner. The authors see this as a 'sign' by the company that they welcome innovation and change, and recognise that there will be false starts before eventual success.

Interviewer		Interviewee	
Length of interview		Role, title	
Notes on confidentiality etc, any associated assets?		Contact details	
Main points		Supporting evidence/stories (indicate tellers relationship to stories and where and when they took place)	
Keywords or phrases			
Field notes/ personal commentary			

As with everything else in this project, the interviews had to have enough structure to join up with other investigations but remain open to interesting possibilities. At the start we defined a four part interview protocol that was applied throughout. Its sections were:

- your interests and background
- your own experiences
- you as a witness
- your ideas and future stories.

The interviews were recorded straight to MP3 and the interviewers' summary notes were gathered immediately into the rough template shown above.

Finding understanding

We have undertaken this research as a narrative enquiry. By collecting and analysing people's stories and experiences, we have been able to develop a relevant and in-depth understanding of the ways that museums, libraries and archives do, and could, work with businesses.

We began with the understanding that the relationships between the sector and business are likely to be complex, nuanced and, in many cases, unique to the organisations and individual working practices involved. The research question did not seek to measure the quantity of such relationships within London; rather, it set out to unravel how and why those relationships develop (or don't), and what benefits they can bring to the organisations involved.

Field work

Key to the narrative method is willingness to accept the researcher's inevitable subjectivity and involvement in social research, and to use these traits to encourage patterns of insight to emerge. Inevitably this means that the enquirer brings a great deal of him or herself to the enquiry and this process needs managing carefully so that it adds value. The perspective of the researcher, where the researcher stands, matters a great deal. Two useful disciplines which are articulated with more emphasis in narrative research than in other qualitative research techniques are:

1. To get the most out of this personal involvement in the research process, it is important for inquirers to reflect honestly on how and why they became involved in the research process and how it affects them and they it, insofar as they can perceive and describe this. In this respect, field notes have more bearing than in other qualitative research techniques.

   These seek to note both what is observed/heard and the reaction of the narrative inquirer as observer. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) would allow for a very wide range of field texts – autobiographical writing, letters, field notes, conversations, research interviews, documents, photographs, memory boxes, poetry. We've been more focused here, but still quite wide-ranging in witnessing and noting many of the events and conversations

The first job of the advisory group was to present us with practical examples of what would constitute success for the project.

which have happened in our personal lives during the enquiry, and referencing previous or related work and research, and considering the bearing these might have on our understanding. We've also allowed, in the narrative database we used, separate categories for field notes which distinguish our observations and emotions, for example, to encourage us to note on the evidence, comment and then explore ourselves in relation to it.

2. The social construction of meaning (Gergen, 1999) around findings and terminology as an active part of the process. It has been important that the materials used for team, project and advisory group discussions come directly from the materials gathered, and that the meanings then generated in group discussion are a part of the sense-making process. Inevitably the sense-making process has elicited new materials as well: some, but not all, of these have been fed back into the database, and all of them have formed part of the body of evidence and have contributed to the understanding and interpretation of the inquirers.

Discovery of terms

Another advantage of the narrative method was the opportunity it afforded us to negotiate the terms of our enquiry with its participants: in other words, to allow them to help us define the questions we would ask.

The first step was to work with the project team to emerge a working definition of knowledge transfer that would make sense to the different groups of people we would talk to as part of the research. We began by hypothesising 'knowledge transfer events' (or KTE's), the precise occasions on which knowledge was found or exchanged. We invented dozens of events that might or might not have involved relevant knowledge transfer and reduced them all to one sentence descriptors.

In order to focus our understanding, we then spent a couple of hours with the project team in a game of advocacy that categorised our examples into:

just right	**not enough knowledge transfer**
good enough	**not enough business**
not quite good enough	**not enough museum, library or archive**

Everyone was encouraged to add categories and to invent possible transfer events, and we ended up with several other kinds of exclusion. These categories were very successful in delineating an area of enquiry that would be both fruitful and sufficiently relevant to the interests of the museums, libraries and archives sector and the funding criteria of the LDA.

This project drove a very useful leap forward in Sparknow's oral history analysis toolkit, to the point where it can almost be offered as a public service. An early beta version is now available at materiali.st and everyone is invited to come and try it out.

The 'not quite good enough' category was particularly useful in refining the team's collective understanding of the project. Often a new example had to be invented to locate a boundary properly and by cheerful, informal debate we arrived at a shared definition of knowledge transfer that was pragmatic, extensional and far more useful than our theoretical definitions.

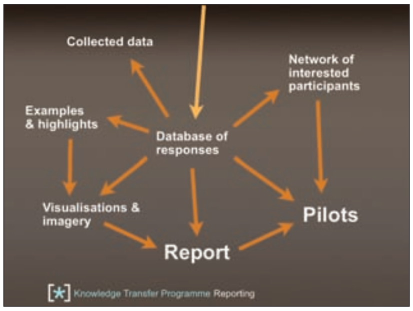
Collective ownership

The final advantage of a narrative approach, in this piece of work, was that we were able to build a community around our work, a large and varied group of people who are now interested in the knowledge transfer function of museums, libraries and archives.

Through the interviews, workshops, advisory group meetings and website for the enquiry we have made meaningful contact with hundreds of people. We now have a strong base of individual advocates who are invested in the research and can help us to build and run the pilot phase of the programme. We have taken care throughout – supported by our evidence-gathering database – to maintain links back to original testimony and – by thorough use of field notes – the context in which it was found. Participants can often see how and where their contributions have fed into our findings and recommendations and so we hope to shift the programme away from central diktat and towards a co-created programme of shared self-improvement that has a chance to spread by itself.

We selected the research participants for their interest or usefulness, rather than to try and create a structured or comprehensive sample, but we were very concerned to ensure that we reached across the whole spectrum of the potentially involved and didn't just make a round of the usual advocates. We began by mapping out all the organisations and institutions we knew of that could tell us something revealing. After some debate, they were all located against two axes that represented the main kinds of breadth we were seeking: one a scale from 'businesslike' to 'academic' and the other a scale of 'engagement', which we used as a shorthand for their level of sophistication with regard to the idea of knowledge transfer. We wanted to reach across both spectra, getting views from big business, corner shops and the most esoteric museums, and making sure that we spoke both to people who were ahead of us in understanding and to those who would need to be persuaded.

Inevitably, there was a snowball element to our sampling, as people became interested in the research and sought us out or passed us on to their networks, but referring back to this diagram throughout the research process helped us not to leave too great a hole in our sample.



The only presentation we made to the advisory group was right at the beginning, partly in order to get quickly through the structure of the project and partly to demonstrate that we could deliver gloss, since the rest of the process was going to be much more inclined towards string and glue.

Advisory group

This project was very fortunate in its advisory group. It was a large and multidisciplinary group, representative of the range of interests relevant to this project. Though initially a bit unwieldy, its members showed tremendous goodwill and dedication and their input was vital to the success of the project. We set the scene with some simple and practical undertakings, drafted in advance and offered to the group as a starting point. There were some for the research team, some for the advisors and some for the group as a whole. We undertook, among other things, to:

- Respond thoughtfully to individual contributions and challenges, and incorporate them without getting thrown off course.
- Remain frank and open about opportunities, risks and problems: this does mean doing the extra communication work to make sure the situation is clear.

The three advisory group meetings were kept informal, pacy and quite hands-on, with exercises, argumentation and tangible outputs. There was almost no powerpointing and we were candid throughout about progress, difficulties and changes of plan. Advisory group members were also among the interview group, where they were particularly strong on the subject of current best practice, and were drafted in as advocates, network-prompters, workshop participants and informal sanity checkers.

The survey postcards were informal and unglossy and meant to be suitable for use with or without supervision. Postcards have been a favourite Sparknow technique for years, and even formed the subject of a research paper in 2003 (Slow Knowledge: uses of the postcard in re-forming organisational time, place and meaning).

Data collection

We adopted a wide-ranging and open-minded approach to collecting people's narratives, giving them as many opportunities as possible to share information with us. The main methods that we have used are interviews, postcards, workshops, literature searches and a specially-constructed discussion and interrogation website for the enquiry.

Interviews were originally envisaged as a relatively minor part of the work, though a critical aspect of developing our understanding, but early on it became clear that in order to hold a meaningful online conversation with the widest group we needed better language and examples than we had, and the interviewers were sent out to gather them.

In total we interviewed 44 people. We found that there is a richness and flexibility within an hour-long conversation that probably can't be achieved any other way, and the interviews succeeded in framing the questions and discussions we put before a wider online audience, where we couldn't explain or probe but had to express things rightly immediately.

However, moving to a more interview-led research model also had disadvantages, particularly in relation to the work burden created by having to analyse dozens of hours of spoken material without the benefit of written transcripts. This is discussed in more detail below.

The questions that emerged from these interviews were first put to a broader audience through the specially-designed postcards, which were distributed widely among museum, library, archive and business professionals. They were designed to elicit responses to some quite broad and open questions, giving people the opportunity to offer as much or as little information as they had time or inclination for. Owing to problems with the Freepost system, we did not receive as many responses as we were expecting; however, they became a useful marketing tool in raising awareness of the website.

The postcards also proved themselves useful in another context, providing the structure for a series of workshops. These were opportunities not only for us to gather interviewees' stories, but also for them to share their ideas and experiences with one another. The workshops were usually opportunistic, shoehorned into meetings and seminars, and they varied in the number of people and the length of time allotted. Each consisted of an overview of the research and then a guided exercise using the postcards to capture examples and begin discussions – another example of co-negotiated meaning.

The project website made a very open appeal for help and was successful in gathering a surprising variety of points of view, including some very thorough and well-written comments and discussion posts.

The postcard format has useful disarming properties, making it easier for people to share apparently small or trivial experiences without feeling that they are too insignificant to mention. It also helps to de-professionalise the whole encounter, which was important to the emergence of group understanding. In total, we ran seven workshops with people from museums, libraries, archives and business.

The specially-built project website was the main tool by which we engaged with a wider audience. We used it both to collect information, by asking specific questions, and to develop our emerging thinking, by posting blogs and asking people to add their comments. The website was marketed via email, through people we identified as 'network leaders', and had an excellent reach, with many people signing up who we had not contacted directly. In total, we have 117 people taking part in the enquiry website from a very broad range of backgrounds.

Finally, we have used literature searches – taken in a very broad sense and including radio broadcasts, newspaper articles and text from websites as well as scholarly writings – to augment and refine our findings.

Pinboards were used throughout the project as a sense-making device and a way to capture questions and concerns without interrupting discussion.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted primarily through a specially-constructed narrative database, to which the public enquiry site was just a temporary front end. Everything that we collected was uploaded to the database as audio or text files. Here, we were able to break down each source into ‘fragments’ of information that we found particularly insightful, representative, surprising or important. These fragments were then tagged and regrouped to form meaningful themes around which we could start to write passages and summaries of our findings.

As discussed, narrative enquiry places considerable emphasis on the experience of the researcher as part of the analytical process. Our involvement with the research allowed us to assimilate information as we went along, generating ideas through our experience. We undertook two phases of ‘sense-making’: the first in early December 2007 and the second in late January 2008. These were opportunities for us to sit down as a team and organise our thoughts and impressions into coherent understandings which could be shared with others.

The narrative database behaved as a check on our own personal understandings of the findings, allowing us to keep going back into the actual data and ensuring that we reported our experiences accurately and didn’t reshape them in the light of later knowledge. Additionally, the presence of three researchers in the team allowed us to debate and refine our own thoughts in the light of others’ experiences and enthusiasms. We found that having three of us allowed one person to push a personal interpretation a long way and two listeners could help adjust perspectives on that push. We also used people outside the enquiry team to help us ‘sanity-check’ our findings. We presented our ideas back to the individuals whose experience had formulated them, as well as others, to ensure that we had not over – or under – analysed their experiences.

Design and production of the final report will be commissioned separately by MLA London, so as well as the raw ingredients we supplied a rough mockup that we felt captured the multiplicity of voices and views we were trying to represent while also putting together a coherent argument.

The advisory group was a key part of this process, composed of individuals from across the museums, libraries, archives and business worlds. During the three advisory group meetings they fed into the research content but, perhaps more importantly, challenged our assumptions and proposals in order to keep us on track. We also posted our initial thoughts and ideas on the enquiry website, where they began to generate some responses from people who were part of the enquiry. This was particularly useful as people on the website were able to provide us with a very different perspective: they were inclined to challenge us as insiders in the enquiry, but people they didn't know, who were straying onto their professional turf. This robust critique really developed our thinking, helping us to understand our hearings and soundings and adjust our biases.

Reporting

The biggest challenge in reporting back from this project was to put our recommendations in the proper context. This was not a piece of desk research or a formal survey, and to present in one of those standard formats would have been misleading. We also had to produce a report that could stand alone but would also support the proposed pilot projects and which could face as well into the public domain as it did into the relatively academic world of museum, library and archive strategy.

We settled on a compound report with very clear delineation of its voices, and we made sure to include as much authentic original testimony as possible. The report had several parts:

- **a central argument,** from discovery to conclusion, written in the enquirers' voice and summarising the present situation, its opportunities and threats and the course that we recommended.
- **a large collection of quotes and paraphrases** chosen for their vividness and presented alongside the central text in order to give a realistic impression of the crowd voice that underlies the report and to make concrete some of our more general remarks.
- **a prologue and epilogue** in the voice of MLA London giving strategic context to our remarks and allowing us to speak freely as finders-out.
- **a set of three detailed vignettes** of current good practice.
- **a set of tabulated pilot schemes** and other suggestions for continuation.
- **this project description document,** intended to make the project as repeatable as possible.

We hope this way to create a versatile report that can be given out in different formats to different audiences without neglecting the range and variety of voices that lie behind it.

The pilots workshop – another carefully lo-fi day, as you can see – was the apex of the project: everything we did beforehand fed into it and it drove the content of all our reporting. Advisory group and project team meetings were scheduled for the period immediately after so as to fit our findings into a strategic context

Arriving at recommendations

The pilot programmes that we proposed as next steps were developed in a similar way. We held a workshop in early January 2007 to present our interim findings to an invited group of key individuals, who went on to discuss the ways in which they might be developed into pilot activity.

This workshop was designed with a futures research technique called 'backcasting' in mind – a variant on our narrative research methods in which the story is built back from a preferred future state to identify the steps by which one might get there. The pinboards and the table top work on this occasion were designed to take hypotheses that were emerging, figure these into a preferred future state around themes and then trace back from this state the steps which might have got one there.

These, along with some additional proposals generated by the advisory group, were the subject of a further workshop with specialist staff at MLA London, who were able to advise on the practicality of each proposed pilot programme, and its fit with other work currently happening in the sector.

Lessons learned

We would like to conclude by giving ourselves a little distance to reflect on our experience of the research project: what went well, what could have gone better and what lasting benefits we can accrue from the materials and analytical frameworks we have created. It is important to set this within a context that recognises the inherent limitations of the method: working narratively, we were not carrying out empirical, hypothesis-led economic research. However, we believe that these considerations are outweighed by the depth and quality of the information that we have been able to generate through our research.

We would have benefited – as is almost always the case in research projects – from a bit more money and a lot more time. In particular, we would have liked to be able to transcribe our interviews for analysis. Without interview transcripts, analysing the audio files became extremely time-consuming and not as effective as we might have liked. It has also meant that there are some materials on the database which have been underused because of a lack of time to sift through them all. However, they are there, and the merit of the database is that they remain there for reuse and re-examination and can be put to work to support or challenge future activity.

The success of this project, and the happy atmosphere in which it was conducted, can all be traced back to a leap of faith on the part of MLA London and the LDA, who bravely and with eyes open decided to trust us and support a novel process with uncertain outcome and subversive leanings.

Having made that decision, they never once wavered or quibbled or tried to dilute the process or its outputs.

More time would also have allowed us to grow the website as a more effective resource. We always knew that it would take time to develop a community of engaged and interested participants, as opposed to casual observers – and indeed, we have the beginnings of that community on the website now. But because the interviews were so necessary to forming our understanding of how to approach the web engagement, and because technological solutions always take longer than they're supposed to, we had to let the timings slip on beginning our online conversation. Additionally, we found it very difficult to get people involved with the more closed questions and discussion points (as opposed to blog entries) that would have allowed us to develop a baseline for future reference. The website succeeded very well as a source of unexpected insight, breadth and challenge. We hoped that it would also yield some quantitative data that would support later comparisons, but it didn't.

We were probably right to allow free-text tagging of items within the database, rather than prescribing from a set list, but this did make it difficult to compare across pieces of evidence. In future, it may be worth considering another approach to tagging which is more prescriptive or has more built-in convergence. Of course, we started with open minds and a fairly blank sheet of paper, so prescribing the tagging would have been very difficult in this instance.

All this said, the project has generated a very rich repository of materials which can and will be put to a range of future uses. We don't doubt that we have taken an appropriate and meaningful approach to answering the research question and one that generated surprise and challenge far beyond what we expected at the beginning.

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Advisory Group

Julian Barker, MLA London Trustee
Susan Amor, Arts and Humanities Research Council
John Attree, London First
Geoffrey Bond, Chair, MLA London
Alan Freeman, GLA Economics
Prof. Clive Holtham, Cass Business School
Will Hutton, The Work Foundation
Sally MacDonald, UCL Collections
Dianna Neal, London Councils
Amy Neale, Queen Mary University of London
Michael Reynier, London Higher
Gaby Rose, British Library Business and IP Centre
Judith Rosser-Davies, London Development Agency

Project Team

Ellen Collins, MLA London
Andrew Holden, MLA London
Maja Maricevic, London Development Agency
William Ross, Sparknow
Judith Rosser-Davies, London Development Agency
Victoria Ward, Sparknow

To find out more, please contact Ellen Collins at
ellen.collins@mlalondon.org.uk or 020 7549 1705

www.mlalondon.org.uk

MLA London

Fourth Floor
53-56 Great Sutton Street
London EC1V 0DG

Tel: +44 (0)20 7549 1700
Fax: +44 (0)20 7490 5225
Email: info@mlalondon.gov.uk

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