# QRator

Overview and Context

QRator has been an innovative, cutting-edge model of public engagement based in a museum environment. With the use of iPads in UCL's museums, visitors, museum curators and academic researchers have the opportunity to provide feedback and essentially co-curate objects themselves.

QRator has been recognised as paving the way for two-way dialogue and meaningful interaction between the university and members of the public. Most recently, the QRator project has won the Museums and Heritage Award for Innovation (2012).

The project was funded by the UCL Pubic Engagement Unit's Innovation Seed funding scheme. This case study identifies key findings from the project and highlights learning for any similar projects of this nature.
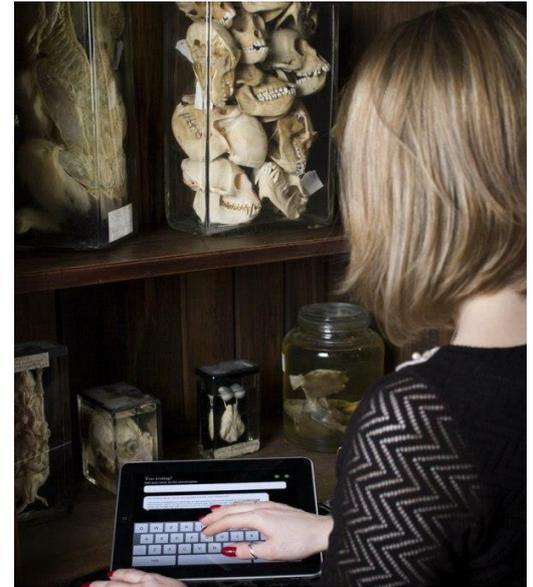
Background:

QRator was a collaborative project between three UCL departments: the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities (UCLDH), UCL Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA), and UCL Museums and Collections.

The project arose from the concept behind 'Tales of Things' technology – which is a method for cataloguing physical objects online and capturing memories and stories. QRator takes the technology a step further – it provides the opportunity to move the discussion of objects direct to the museum label and then onto a digital collaborative interpretation label, allowing for further interaction between visitors.

Essentially, QRator is an iPad/iPhone and web based system that allows everyone to be a curator and share their views. Visitors can examine an object before leaving their thoughts via an iPad to create a digital, 'living' label that subsequent visitors can read and respond.

What happened?

Content currently covers three museums at UCL; The Grant Museum of Zoology, The Petrie Museum of Egyptology and the UCL Art Museum. By downloading a free application to an iPhone or android phone, visitors are able to see rolling updates to the digital label after they leave the museum, or via Twitter. Participants are also able to take part in the conversation online via the QRator site (http://www.qrator.org/) with comments appearing live within the museum. The museums will offer a continual programme of 'Current Questions' for visitors to engage in. UCL is taking the opportunity to rethink what a university museum can be; a place not simply for a passive experience but for conversation, positioning the museums as a place of experimentation, dialogue and debate.
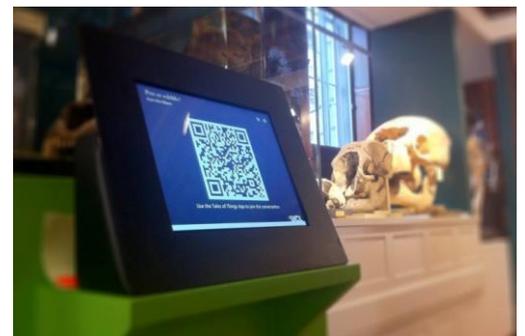
Facts and Figures

There have been **4348** visitor contributions through the QRator iPads.

QRator has **won an award** as part of the UK Museums and Heritage Awards for Excellence (2012), in the 'Innovation' category.

QRator featured in the highly prestigious **NMC Horizon Report**: Museum Edition 2011. (http://www.nmc.org/horizon-project/horizon-reports).

Emerging themes from the evaluation

Between March 2011 and June 2012, there have been 4348 visitor contributions through the QRator iPads. This has led to possibly the greatest outcome, and the intention behind the whole project, that visitors are genuinely engaging and leaving feedback for further discussion.

The quality of the responses has far exceeded expectations, considering the risk of misuse that comes with using a free-text anonymous digital device. In total around a third of all comments (after moderation) directly attempt to answer the question and conversations between visitors in the Museum at different times are common, highlighting not only that visitors are reading the questions posed by the Museum, but also suggesting that visitors are inspired to share their own experiences, thus co-constructing multiple public interpretations of museum objects.

Linked to this, the museums at UCL have been innovative in adopting the concept of 'radical trust.' That is, trusting visitors to leave honest feedback with no moderation or intervention from the museums. Traditionally, many museums have been hesitant to allow unregulated communication between visitors, for fear of inappropriate comments.

In the Grant museum specifically, research suggests that 1 in 3.35 visitors to the museum choose to leave a contribution on one of the QRator iPads (assuming that visitors make no more than one contribution per visit). This rate is a lot higher than feedback often received through paper-based forms.

Due to the success of the QRator project, the Imperial War Museum invited QRator project leaders to collaborate on a funding application to NESTA's Digital Research and Development Fund for Arts and Culture. This collaboration was successful, ranking amongst the top eight of 495 applications, and funding has been awarded to support art and cultural organisations to work with those with digital expertise to understand the potential offered by new technologies.

The findings from the QRator project are also disseminated regularly at conferences for the wider museums sector, including 'Museums and the Web,' 'Museum Next' and 'Digital Humanities 2012.'

Further information is available at:

QRator website:
www.qrator.org

Learning from the Process

What worked well?

- Promotion of the project. The project has received widespread recognition in books, journals and conference papers, and has also been the subject of much online coverage on various websites.

- Sharing knowledge. Members of the QRator team have been offering support and advice to other museums and organisations that are interested in using QRator, such as The V&A, Natural History Museum, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills,, Design Museum, Manchester Museum, Tyne and Wear Museum and Archives.

- QRator was a collaborative project between three UCL departments: each bringing a specific skill set and expertise required to successfully deliver the project.

What could be done differently?

- Sustainability and legacy. Like with many public engagement projects there is a need to consider how the project will be sustained to ensure that there is a legacy, especially once the funding has been spent. The team have been working hard to ensure that the project continues, by promoting the project and seeking out future opportunities.