



STS Careers Podcast – Chantal Chevallier talks to Museum Curator, and former BSc HPS student Charlotte Connelly

Charlotte graduated the BSc in History and Philosophy of Science in 2008, and went on to achieve an MSc in Museum Studies. She worked as assistant curator at the Science Museum in London until 2012, and is currently Museum Curator at the Polar Museum at the University of Cambridge. This interview was recorded in 2012.

CH Welcome, listeners. Today, we have a great podcast planned for you, as we are joined by our lovely alumna, Charlotte. Charlotte will be talking to us about her experiences in the job market since graduating from UCL. I'm Chantal Chevallier, a third year STS undergrad and it is a pleasure to have you with us today, Charlotte.

CC Thank you very much.

CH So to start off with, just to give our listeners a background, what did you study while at UCL?

CC I studied History and Philosophy of Science in the Science and Technology Studies Department.

CH Excellent. So what did you do from graduating?

CC Well, when I finished, I think I knew from about halfway through my third year that I wanted to work in museums as a way of carrying on doing history of science. So the first thing I did was move out of London, because I couldn't afford to stay here, so I went and lived with some family in Liverpool and got a part-time job working in a kitchen, so I'm really good at peeling potatoes. While I was doing that, I volunteered part time in a couple of museums up there. So I worked for National Museums Liverpool, where I had really fascinating project helping them document their algae specimens.

CH Wow.

CC Yes, it was good.

CH Did you find that the science communication skills you acquired whilst in STS helped you a lot in those jobs or was it more once you got into the job market and into the practical field, then it was learning as you went along?

CC I think the communication side of things will help in any job you're going to. And, certainly, when I was doing my master's, which I did after volunteering for a year, I spent a lot of time blogging which I then used as a skill on my CV to prove that I

could communicate. So I'm sure some of that came from looking at science journalism and things during my course.

CH So what is your current role?

CC I currently work at the Science Museum here in London. I'm Assistant Curator of Computing and Communications.

CH Excellent. And how long have you been there?

CC Just over a year and a half now I think. I still feel quite new, amazingly, after that long.

CH What would you say was the best piece of advice or information or skill that you acquired whilst at UCL that you are now using at the Science Museum or even in the jobs that you had up in Liverpool?

CC Probably, it was juggling my time, because while I was here I did lots of society stuff. I had a part time job. I handed in my essays as well, I did do a bit of studying while I was here as well.

CH And what societies were you part of?

CC In particular, the music society. I was president in my final year, but I also played water polo as well.

CH Is there any piece of advice that you could give current students which you wish you would have had whilst... or known about whilst at UCL that you've acquired since?

CC Good one. I would probably advise current students to really maintain all the contacts that they gain while at university because you don't know where anyone is going to go. It is a lot easier now with social media, but at the same time it's quite easy to let those relationships drop and there are certainly people that I studied with who I'm still in touch with but on a more professional basis.

CH Yes, yes. I know you mentioned that since graduating you left London because London is quite expensive, but did you find it hard to get a job even in Liverpool? I know you said you had the museum jobs but up until then, you worked in the kitchen. Was that because you... was it hard to find work? Because I know that that is quite a big concern for students at the moment with the current situation.

CC Especially in museums, there are lots of roles that are hard to get into but museums are super competitive. So, in Liverpool, I found it hard to get a job full stop, and the job in the kitchen I worked in a nursing home with my aunt. She managed to find me that work. And then, the stuff I did in Liverpool for museums were all voluntary. It took me probably six months to get even voluntary roles. So, yes, it was tough.

CH What would you say to the students who would like to also go into museum work? What would be the best... the next steps?

- CC Volunteering is really important. So if you can volunteer while you are at UCL - I did a bit at The Grant Museum here - then that's really good. It also will tell you if you really want to work in a museum, which is important because you're going to have to invest a lot of time to get there. Also, you can do lots of things like, I've got a friend who writes for Culture24 which is an online museum site. So she goes and reviews new exhibitions or new museums. Or you can even blog personally or share you experiences somehow but just to demonstrate that you really are interested and you're not just going through the hoops of, well, I've done my degree, now, I'll do my masters and then I expect to get a job, because it's simply not that easy.
- CH Excellent. And for those who might not now, could you tell us what an assistant curator is and what they do?
- CC Sure. It's a really mixed bag. At the Science Museum... it's probably a different role for every museum you'd go to. At the Science Museum, I can do anything from developing content for forthcoming exhibitions to answering public inquiries. Tomorrow evening, I'm going to be working at a corporate event where we're trying to develop possible sponsors. I acquire objects. Recently, I acquired a satellite radio which is a fairly new piece of technology but it wasn't represented by our collections. So getting in touch with people that know about it and doing the research alongside acquiring the object and more besides, I can't think of everything I do.
- CH What's it like working in museums? Just in general, you know, for the ones who are interested in pursuing that career.
- CC It's really rewarding. It's one of the few professions out there where pretty much everyone you work with is there because they really want to be there. And you have to be because you're not going to get rich doing it. But, certainly, if you want to do history of science or science communication, there aren't so many places to go and museums are a fantastic way of doing it.
- CH Is there anything that has come up that you weren't expecting to deal with, that either your time at UCL prepared you well for, or you had to then suddenly acquire these new skills and things like that? Is there anything at all that was a bit unexpected?
- CC Probably, two things. The corporate side of museums which I hadn't really thought about, but pretty much any project you do, you'll need funds for, so there's quite a bit of getting people to advocate your projects or trying to get people to give you cash which is really tricky. And the other thing is, there are quite a lot of project management in there, so another piece of advice might be to go out and, again, through societies or whatever, get a bit of management experience running small projects.

- CH Mm-hmm. Excellent advice. Thank you. So what are your future career plans? Do you plan to stay with the science museum or would you like to do any other collaboration with other museums?
- CC That's a really good question. Certainly, in the history of science field, there aren't many museums to go to. So if you want to stay in museums, you're quite restricted, if you stick to Britain, between the Science Museum, the Natural History Museum, National Museum of Scotland and already you're getting thin, so there's Manchester, there's Liverpool and various other places.
- Ideally, I'd like to go on and do a PhD, even better would be if I could it part time and still continue to work. Beyond that, it's really open and it's the kind of job where you gain lots of varied experiences. So if in 10 years' time, I decide, that's it, I don't want to do this anymore, I'll have lots of routes that I could look at.
- CH Is there anything that you would change or do differently?
- CC No, I had a fantastic experience at UCL. I think if I did change anything, I would have got even more experienced with the museums, maybe picked a different master's. Museum studies is really good but curating is very specialist, so actually something more focused on the history of science or technology would probably have served me best during the long run.
- CH What do you think the modules that you took whilst at STS... what ones have been most useful to you?
- CC I did the project which started with Hasok Chang about the history of electricity, and I'm still in touch with Chiara and her current cohort of students who are continuing that, which has been a really good experience, and it's nice to see it develop. And probably also some of the communication stuff, so with Steve Miller we did our own radio show and did a bit of more journalistic writing which I think is really good, because essay writing is really only good for writing essays and not a lot else.
- CH And I suppose you found that quite helpful in your roles since UCL.
- CC Definitely, being able to communicate to people other than historians and other than scientists is massively important in pretty much any job you're going to have.
- CH What would you say are the biggest differences between the two groups as it were?
- CC Wow. I think you have to be a lot clearer and use a lot less jargon and be much more concise, and know what is the minimum amount of information you can use for any non-specialist group.
- CH So to people who would like to get into volunteering at museums, what would you say are the top three things that would make somebody's application standout?
- CC For three things... it's really difficult and it really varies depending on the role, but certainly the number one thing I look for is enthusiasm and being self-starting so

someone that I can leave for a morning and trust that they're not just twiddling their thumbs.

Number two would be a definite interest, so we get quite a lot of fairly generic applications to the Science Museum. I would really like to work in a museum and I'm really keen on museums. That's not narrow enough so really target your application.

A third thing might be to demonstrate that you know a bit about that particular museum. So I visited the Science Museum before I really liked this particular exhibition. It's a really good way to show that you are interested.

CH Mm-hmm. Well, thank you very much, Charlotte. It has been fantastic talking to you. That's about all we have time for today. So if you'd like to find out anymore advice on careers guidance, then please take a look at the career section of the STS website which you can find at www.ucl.ac.uk/sts.

Many thanks as well to Dr. Karen Bultitude and to Jo Pearson for providing the theme tune and the hosting. My name is Chantal Chevallier. Thank you for listening and goodbye.