
Citizen Curators

Cultural Democracy in Action?

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article presents findings and reflections of the Citizen Curators program, designed and led by the author on behalf of Cornwall Museums Partnership and seven participating museums. Dubbed an experiment in cultural democracy, as well as providing a novel alternative pathway into museum work, Citizen Curators took place between 2017 and 2021 with four cohorts resulting in more than 80 successful completers, one-fifth of whom went on to jobs in the sector. The program was designed as an action research project in curatorial education in an era of equity, socially engaged practice, and ethical awareness. The article presents qualitative and quantitative findings on the program's design, impact, and what was learned about the realities of cocuration, diversity, and inclusion over the four-year program.

■ **KEYWORDS:** cocuration, curatorial, democracy, diversity, education, inclusion, museums

The “curatorial turn” has been described and discussed at length in the contemporary art world over the past two decades (Balzer 2014; Obrist 2015; Markopoulos 2016). Barbara Fischer (2016: 135) invokes the reflections of Ulay, a pioneering Polaroid photographer and performance artist, who described the explosion of professionalized artists in the 1980s as a “global swarming . . . like bees” that required more “beekeepers,” that is, curators. That momentum kept gathering pace and now curating has, in Fischer’s words, gone viral. Indeed, editors have become curators, beards and nails are curated on Instagram, and AI is curating memories for us on our feeds and camera rolls. Contrast this with the curatorial downturn experienced in public history museums and civic galleries over the same period, where the role and status of the curator, as a custodian of collections held in trust for the public, and as knowledge producers, have diminished considerably in favor of experience-led and socially minded participatory practice (Kendall Adams 2019). This view is somewhat anecdotal, based on news from the museum press and personal professional experience of working with many museums who have lost curators and collections specialists, not just because of financial pressures but because of an ideological shift toward more wide-ranging and public-facing roles. The Museums Association’s 2020 to 2022 Redundancy Tracker traces numbers and locations of lost museum roles but not their type (Museums Association 2022b). Data on roles undertaken by the museum volunteer workforce is almost impossible to come by. Similarly anecdotal are suggestions that curatorial roles remain higher status than engagement roles within the sector, and by society at large. Whatever the actual



realities, which all people will experience differently, there is little doubt that curatorial roles are shifting and blending.

So, while the contemporary art world is craving more beekeepers, public museum curators are experiencing accusations of gatekeeping and stymying cultural democracy. This sense of a curatorial downturn was a significant influence in the creation and philosophy of the Citizen Curators program, as well as establishing the Curatorial Research Centre in 2018—an organization dedicated to advancing modern, ethical curatorial practice. Unhappy with traditional notions of what a curator is, while designing the pilot for Citizen Curators, it made sense to test and critique my new and simple definition of a curator: the 50 percent model (CRC 2020). The 50 percent model supposes that a curator is part knowledge creator, part communicator who values equally investment in knowledge production and investment in communicating that knowledge through a variety of modes and media relatable by different people: “Whether keeper or custodian, editor or selector the curator should use their power to encourage two-way conversations that narrow the gap of understanding” (CRC 2021b). This model fundamentally challenges the predetermined institutional view of a curator and who can be one.

Curatorial Democracy or Democratizing Curating?

In 2018, 64 Million Artists published a report on cultural democracy in arts and culture for Arts Council England in which the Citizen Curators pilot program was featured. The authors behind 64 Million Artists emphasize nuance in their definitions: “Cultural Democracy isn’t anti professional arts practice or the artist. Great artists, curators, directors, producers help us look at the world differently, and make sense of our place within. But it challenges the idea that art is only what artists do” (2018: 3). Proponents of cultural democracy also argue for recognizing the plurality of cultural traditions and activities that happen outside of cultural and creative institutions and avoid hierarchies of value placed on certain kinds of output over others, for example, enabling grime to be given equal credence to opera. This understanding of cultural democracy—facilitated, shared equally, and two-way—was a critical foundation of the Citizen Curators program, as it was predicated on the idea that, with support, anybody could be a curator, and curating could take on many forms (24). In a public museum setting, the democratization of curatorship is less about unlocking the gates and letting people in than it is about having new and different conversations with new and different people, while being much more transparent about the realities of curating museums compared to their public perception.

Identifying the Need for Citizen Curators

As a career curator in public museums and academia, there was no doubt in my mind that with the proper support, training, and challenge, anyone with an aptitude for critical thinking could become a good curator. Across my career I encountered curators more enamored by their position and status than their collections and audiences, and then there were the curators who were the most bright and generous people you could meet, always willing to help, share, and give freely. Surely if there was a gap to narrow, it was by doing more of the latter and less of the former, without eschewing curatorial value and skills built up in the public museums sector altogether.

The growing call for museums to address the historical marginalization of large sections of the population in their workforces, and in collections and their interpretation, has significantly

affected the policies and the zeitgeist of the UK museum sector over the past two decades (Sandell and Nightingale 2012). These policies acknowledge inequalities in access, inclusion, and diversity, but rarely demand or make room for the institutional change in behavior and attitude that is needed, focusing more on time-limited demonstrations of better representation of the excluded or marginalized. As social and economic disparity has increased in the UK, museum relationships with the public have been forced to change and be seen to be more relevant and more activist, even if the reality is far from the case (Janes and Sandell 2019). Museums follow trends in society—they rarely lead them.

Nevertheless, pressure from those working in the museum sector and those outside it are beginning to converge when it comes to responding to broader sociocultural concerns around excluded identities and ethical causes, from fossil fuel sponsorship (Culture Unstained 2021) to decolonization (Tuhiwai Smith [1999] 2012) and better recognition for front-of-house staff (Front of House in Museums 2022) to those who identify as working class (Museum as Muck 2022) or ethnically diverse (Museum Detox 2022). These external and internal pressures have influenced sector bodies such as the Museums Association (2022a) to lead calls for museums to transform their purpose from just preserving collections, knowledge and memories to being agents of socially engaged change. Despite these clarion calls to make museums and culture accessible to all, and the fact that participating in museums is good for people and can change lives, the relationship between social inequalities and cultural participation, particularly around class, gender, and race, seems to remain entrenched. Only relatively recently has the hand-wringing about a lack of equity, diversity, and inclusivity in the museum sector been challenged in relation to their root causes such as adequate wealth and family support: Can you afford to work for free? (Brook et al. 2020: 144–164)? How culturally predisposed are you to museums and galleries because of your upbringing, formative education, connections/network, and sociogeographic background (sometimes referred to cultural capital) (190–211)? The perceived exclusivity of museum curating in large part hinges on access to particular education and networks, for example, a master's degree, and barriers to gaining experience because you cannot afford to volunteer or happen to live in the countryside rather than the big city. If curatorial training could be redesigned and opened to new people in new ways, would it be possible to better understand and address the curatorial downturn and address inequalities at the same time?

Curatorial Training as Cocuration

The major outcome of the shift in purpose to be more democratic and inclusive, or to be seen to be more democratic and inclusive, has been the rise of cocuration and coproduction projects in large part owing to growing financial support from funders for collaborative working between communities and museums. The notion of cocuration has been relatively easily adopted by many museums, where decision-making on collections and their interpretation and presentation, for example, through exhibition, is shared in varying degrees between the museum and a preselected community group. However, this mode of working is not sustained core museum activity, as evidenced in the review of the *Our Museum* project two years on (Bienkowski 2018). The faces may change, but the structures remain the same. There are two further dimensions at play. The first is that funded cocuration or community engagement projects are almost exclusively in the domain of medium and larger-sized museums with significant professional staff, but most of the UK's 1,800 accredited museums are small, and of those, a significant number are already entirely or heavily reliant on a long-term volunteer workforce from the local community to perform critical functions from maintenance to documentation. The second dimension is the preeminence of

the museum's agenda in cocuration, "subtly coercing people to be part of the museum's 'social improvement' agenda, while placing people in the role of passive beneficiaries" (Lynch 2014: 2).

The tensions created during interactions between community-based organizations working in the margins and museums working in the mainstream reveal the large gap in understanding that museums have of their community partners, their actual desires, interests, and needs, and reveal structural problems such as an absence of remuneration or equitable reward for time and expertise provided by those working with the museum on a "budget of love" (Keith 2012: 53–57). I contend that community engagement is frequently mislabeled as cocuration, but fundamentally the latter has more to do with shared decision-making and acceptance of challenge—a respectful two-way conversation—than with being seen as more relevant to groups of people traditionally not seen in a museum. Cocurators also need the means and confidence to understand and influence museum decisions, and this necessitates training and support. The underlying fairness of the Citizen Curators program was a preoccupation from the earliest stages of its design. What would participants get in return for their time and talents? The very specific context of the small museum volunteer workforce would also influence how this curatorial training program would function in practice. The cocuration I was proposing completely blurred the lines between staff and volunteer, and workforce and community. Citizen Curators would join the museum's volunteer workforce, be trained in curatorial skills and museum awareness, and have a meaningful say in their museum's collections-led work.

While Change Maker at Cornwall Museums Partnership and Royal Cornwall Museum (2016–2018)—an Arts Council England leadership development program for marginalized arts professionals—I was working from a position of advantage: I understood the barriers, having experienced them for myself, and I now had the means to do something about them. From researching, speaking, and working with museum volunteers, I found that time and cost of travel were the biggest causes of exclusion (Goskar 2017b). As a museum professional and researcher based in a rural region, remote from major centers of connectivity, I also experienced this structural exclusion. The other major cause of exclusion was the traditional way of volunteering in small museums, which relied on regular shifts and a clear set of instructions, and if working with collections, often meant staff supervision too. People who needed to earn a living to support themselves and others, or had caring responsibilities, and could not afford to give their time for free, were most obviously excluded from volunteering in their local museum or being able to access the kind of curatorial training that would enable them to participate meaningfully—and confidently. The result I observed was that a very narrow group of usually retired people with independent incomes had the most influence in their local museum.

The socioeconomic and cultural background of Cornwall is also important. Many of these features will be shared by museums in other large and remote rural regions. Cornwall has more than 70 museums, all classed as small, in operating budgets and size of staff. Cornwall's permanently resident population of nearly 570,000 people is dominated by older and retired age-groups (50-plus) (UK Population Data 2022). This population swells dramatically in the summer and holiday months with tourists accounting for most annual museum visits (Goskar 2017a). High deprivation levels and low stable employment opportunities that meet basic costs of living are constant challenges (Transformation Cornwall 2019). Most Cornish heritage sites and museums are closed or have reduced opening hours in the winter meaning, unless they are museum actors themselves, for example, volunteers who run museums without the help of paid staff, the opportunities for communities to enjoy their local museums can be severely limited. It is possible to perceive that existing museum volunteers are already curatorial citizens who play an essential role in constituting or amplifying the workforces of small rural museums, are influential in shaping collections and interpretation, and have agency in how audiences experience their museums.

The Citizen Curators program was born from allying these three paradigms: challenging the curatorial downturn, the favorable funding landscape for socially engaged practice, cocuration, and cultural democracy; and addressing time and cost barriers which limit diversity and curatorial opportunity in rural regions like Cornwall. From the start, Citizen Curators was pitched as a “work-based curatorial training and museum awareness programme aimed at volunteers from our community” (CRC 2021a).

Designing for a New Curatorial Community

The six-month pilot of Citizen Curators took place from October 2017 to March 2018 at Royal Cornwall Museum with five new volunteers, four of whom were under 26 years old. The main message of the pilot was: in return for volunteering at the museum, Citizen Curators had access to a high-quality, structured, learning program—something that would be valuable in their lives and careers. Learning took place in half-day sessions, and volunteering took place in different ways depending on personal schedules. From the earliest days of the pilot to the end of the program in 2021, it was very important that the program was a worthwhile investment of participants’ time, and in the program’s evaluation over 90 percent of each cohort reported participation as excellent value for time and rated the Citizen Curators experience as more fulfilling than conventional volunteering because of their freedom to make decisions and shape a final outcome. The underlying aspiration of the pilot program was to test high-quality, flexible, coaching-style curatorial training, an immediate experience of applying that training within the museum setting through undertaking collections-led projects, and to encourage constructive reflection by participants on their museum experience. At all costs, I wanted to avoid what Bernadette Lynch describes as “participants [being] encouraged to identify their own good with the good of the institution” (2014: 9).

The pilot program was based around building confidence and competence in different areas of curatorial skill. The 50 percent model of a curator, described above, is further expanded by a competency model developed alongside, which could quantitatively gauge confidence levels in five overarching areas of curatorial practice: research, communication, technical, theory, and awareness (community, organizational, sector). These were monitored and compared in entry and exit personal evaluations where confidence levels were rated on a scale of 1 to 10 (Figure 1). Competency frameworks are common in mentoring and coaching culture and rely heavily on cultivating critical self-awareness (Clutterbuck et al. 2016). It was important that Citizen Curators fostered a culture of self-led learning alongside traditional teacher-student knowledge sharing. This approach placed the onus on the Citizen Curator to take charge of their own learning and their own experience in the museum, learning from the fulfilling and inspiring as well as from the disappointing and challenging, rather than relying constantly on being guided or managed. In the time- and space-strapped small museums taking part in the program, this was especially important.

Facilitated discussion, activity-based workshops, and practical “show and tell” formats were used for the sessions, which took place fortnightly to monthly over a six-month period. This pattern remained in the full rollout of the program in subsequent years. The mixture of activities was aimed at developing participants’ critical faculties and to be able to see and identify how broad sectoral issues such as diversity and democracy are represented in the way museum organizations work and in the way they manage, display, and interpret collections. Colleagues from host museums and some external colleagues provided specialist talks or demonstrations; for example, staff at the Museum of Cornish Life ran a session on how to develop an audience from

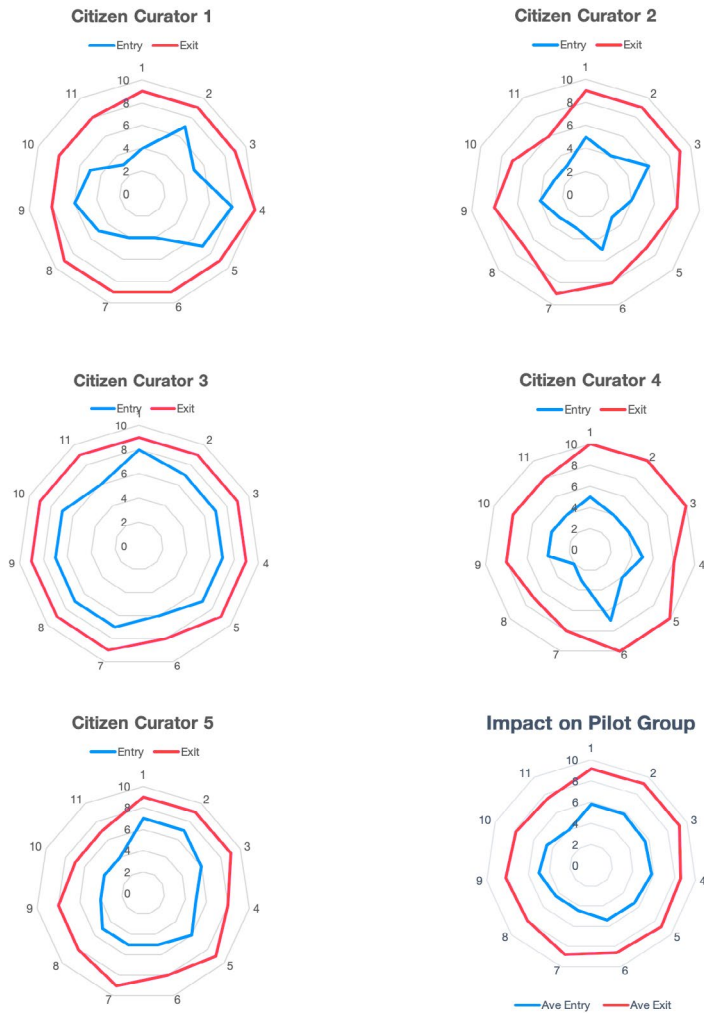


Figure 1. Impact of the Citizen Curators program on curatorial competencies of the pilot group 2017–18.

immobile communities such as people in care homes, a colleague from the Curatorial Research Centre provided a show-and-tell on 2D and 3D digitization of collections, and a colleague from PK Porthcurno introduced Citizen Curators to the challenges of curating scientific and technical collections. The sessions had more structure than a project-based work placement but did not take on a lecture- or seminar-style format more reminiscent of college and university courses. The program covered topics such as the purpose of museums and curators, collections, ethics, research, communication, interpretation, representation, communities, and key trends in museums. Across all the cohorts, optional field trips were organized, such as to the Shelterbox Visitor Centre and Camborne School of Mines Museum.

As the program leader, I attempted to develop a role as part of each annual community, rather than the giver of knowledge. I learned from the group, and they learned from each other. In the pilot year we developed the program's values and conventions together, which remained a key homing point in all the sessions, in all subsequent years. In essence, these were being encouraged

to ask open questions, to be curious and responsive, and to listen respectfully. Each session was designed according to an experiential learning framework (Kolb 1984), and active reflection was part of every session. This helped solidify the group's learning and make feedback an endemic part of all interactions with the Citizen Curators. Alongside the core learning program, Citizen Curators worked on projects in their museum with "real-world" outcomes such as preparing for events and exhibitions, conducting research, and writing interpretation. Sometimes these were within a broad framework decided by the museum; sometimes they were more open, and the Citizen Curators could decide what to do (Goskar 2019: 56–63).

The outcomes of the pilot program significantly influenced how the Citizen Curators program would continue to adapt and develop. Citations from the pilot cohort's evaluation surveys included: "It's nice to have our voices included." "I feel confident now I can go for museum jobs." "My highlight was talking about opium on the radio." The museum itself benefitted from new collections content and could observe the benefits of new (for the museum) ways of communicating with audiences, such as on Instagram. While the program was seen as a success by demonstrating an additional model for museum volunteering, there were points of resistance. Some ideological opposition from staff curators suggested that the participants should not be permitted to use a title with "curator" in it. From the participant point of view, it was really important to them to be able to use this title, particularly for those wanting their experience to count toward a future job or study program. Resistance should be expected in any new collaborative program, particularly one that encourages shared decision-making and a letting go of control over museum narratives and knowledge. An important lesson from the pilot was balancing the agency of the Citizen Curators with the genuine concerns of museum colleagues, for example, over access to collections stores or databases. When disagreements arose, I attempted to negotiate agreement between museum leads and Citizen Curators. My presence as an impartial third party was important.

From a program development point of view, the pilot vindicated the approach we took, and Cornwall Museums Partnership was keen to roll out the program across its new Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation consortium of seven museums (2018–2021) with the stated goals of diversifying the voices that talk about collections and the start of an alternative pathway into museum work. In 2018, thanks to a three-year grant from the Museums Association's Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, the Citizen Curators program was expanded across seven museums.¹ Over the four years, a total of 116 Citizen Curators were recruited, and 82 successfully completed the program, receiving certificates of achievement. This represents a 71 percent success rate.

Not Recruiting in Our Own Image

Discussions of diversity in the UK museum sector constantly cite narrow and rigid recruitment practices as a barrier to entering the sector (BOP Consulting 2016). The pilot encouraged a complete rethink of the recruitment process. Recruitment should be about getting to know each other, the nature of the work, and commitment involved. We (Cornwall Museums Partnership, Curatorial Research Centre, and the museums) were interested in recruiting people *because* of their ideas about museums and diverse life experiences, not in spite of them. We created a questionnaire, rather than an application form, without asking about previous jobs or educational attainments. We did not do any preapplication diversity and inclusion monitoring. We asked questions such as, "What particularly attracts you about this museum?" and "What hobbies and talents do you have that you can bring to the museum?" We asked about access needs and

any adjustments that might help with participation. Throughout the program we made several adjustments to timings and break times, to account for public transport, support the need for mental rest, and accommodate work and care responsibilities. Prior to applications we organized informal open events with refreshments, as opportunities to get to know the program and the museums. Year 3, which took place from January to June 2021, was redesigned for digital delivery, as all UK museums remained closed during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. I created a video to give prospective candidates a flavor of the program before applying, including testimonies from former Citizen Curators to encourage confidence in new applicants.

Each museum could nominate up to five participants to ensure that the workshop groups would not become too large. In years 1 and 2, sessions were duplicated in “east” and “west” clusters so that travel would not be too onerous for participants spread across a large area with poor connectivity. The sessions were itinerant to give prospective participants opportunities to get to know the different museums participating in the program. While the recruitment process was the same across all seven museums, each museum could advertise particular themes or projects that Citizen Curators could take part in. Nominated museum leads, who took on the duty of supporting their Citizen Curator groups over and above their other responsibilities, had the final say over which participants they put forward. Over the course of the program, eligibility was clarified, as annually people with significant prior or paid museum or related experience were applying. Overall, we were aiming for participants who could demonstrate a curiosity for museums, heritage, and collections but had not had the chance to work professionally in them. In year 3, in response to challenge from prospective applicants, we made an exception for those who just had front-of-house or operational experience who wanted to move into collections or engagement work. The recruitment process underlined how much human judgment and awareness of bias and blind spots matter on a case-by-case basis.

The results of each cohort’s recruitment also depended on where museums chose to advertise the opportunity. Most of the time this was in traditional channels to existing museum followers, such as newsletters, volunteer noticeboards, and social media rather than in new spaces, but some did advertise in local newspapers, parish magazines, and local community spaces. Because of the adaptation of the final year of the program to be delivered digitally and remotely, Cornwall Museums Partnership and participating museums agreed it would be an interesting opportunity to broaden their pool of volunteers nationally, rather than be limited to those living in or within reach of their doorsteps. This resulted in 66 percent of year 3 Citizen Curators participating from Cornwall and 33 percent participating from other parts of the UK, including Scotland.

Supporting and Understanding Diverse Voices

Diversity as a movement or trend in the museums sector has always been understood in terms of proportions, percentages, and singular label representation: gender, race, sexuality, class, age. From my own experience as a minoritized person working in museums, it was anathema to me to pursue the targeting of singular identity-based groups as defined by me, the law, or the sector at large, particularly when it comes to race and class or cultural background and wealth. The gross limitation of positive action schemes is that they are usually designed by the majority privileged and enacted upon the minority, and the focus is too heavily biased toward achieving momentary representation than it is in challenging the power structures that support inequalities. The main aim of diversity and inclusion monitoring in Citizen Curators was to make sure we had a detailed, honest, and nuanced view of participants and the program’s effect on attracting people traditionally experiencing barriers to participation and training.

Diversity and inclusion data were collected in a survey during a dedicated activity in the core session entitled “Curators in the Community,” which took place midway during the program. Using it as a discussion point and learning outcome, I could gauge group feelings about the process, whether the sharing of this information was felt to be intrusive or irrelevant, and to what extent participants wished to misdeclare as a gentle protest. In one session the question of misreporting became a topic of discussion, and it is very likely a small minority of participants in this cohort did not declare honest responses as a result. This is different to choosing not to declare a particular aspect of their identities or life situation, the choice to do so was entirely theirs. Most participants, however, completed these surveys generously and understood that this was an opportunity to better understand how differences in background, identity and needs affects people’s desire to participate in museums. The contextual approach also resulted in a high response rate, ranging from 69 to 90 percent of total recruits who started each year’s program. Overall, the aim was to help us learn whether our goal to alleviate time and cost barriers was well-targeted and the results were reviewed annually.²

The questionnaire permitted multiple choices of response, and none. Across the program there were changing scenarios in each year (Figure 2). Most striking were the dominance of women; more age diversity than traditional museum volunteers; cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity broadly reflective of the Cornish population, a notable minority who spent their for-

Figure 2. Significant findings from diversity and inclusion monitoring of Citizen Curators 2017–2021.

Inclusivity marker	Pilot+Yr 1	Yr 2	Yr 3
Gender bias towards women	71%	92%	79%
Dominant age groups	26–30 (26%)	61–65 (25%)	21–25 (38%)
Non-British background (nationality)	0%	5%	16%
Black, missed heritage or non-white (ethnicity)	0%	0%	8%
Grew up outside the UK	0%	14%	13%
Identifying as Cornish	38%	12%	21%
Identifying as working class	39%	48%	50%
Disability or condition affecting daily life	60%	48%	48%
Financially dependent on another/state	13%	14%	33%
Reliance on public transport	22%	19%	38%
Degrees at Masters level	42%	44%	29%

mative years in multiple places outside the UK, adding a different dimension to lived experience and affinity for other cultures that cannot be understood from simplistic declarations of race and ethnicity; a high proportion of each cohort identified as working class; on average half of each cohort reported living with disabilities and other conditions affecting daily life; and a significant minority of participants came to the program with a high level of education at master's level.

A specific dimension to diversity and inclusion in the Citizen Curators program was Cornish identity. In 2014 the UK government recognized the Cornish as a National Minority with similar status to the Welsh, Scottish, and Irish under the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Alexander and Williams 2014). Despite this, museums in Cornwall were sluggish about their support of Cornish identity (Goskar 2016), so, in an effort to increase awareness and confidence, the Citizen Curators program included the topic of Cornishness in its content, invited participants to contribute to the Cornish National Collection, discussed below, and monitored Cornish participation. The results for data on Cornish identity paint a complex and contradictory picture. While comprising the highest numbers of participants self-identifying as Cornish, years 1 and 3 contributed the least to the Cornish National Collection component of the Citizen Curators program. Overall, the gender (im)balance and academic background of Citizen Curators in particular echoes that of the UK museum workforce and suggests there is something more fundamental at play when it comes to museums' relationships with society at large. The high proportion of participants declaring a disability or condition affecting daily life vindicated the flexible design of the program as well as the method of recruitment. Conclusions beyond these are much harder to come by and are presented here for others to compare.

Creating Two-Way Conversations

The cultural democracy aims of the Citizen Curators program were not just about increasing representational diversity and tackling barriers to participation; they were also to narrow the gap between communities and collections and to blur the lines between engagement and curatorial roles within museums. As introduced earlier, Citizen Curators sat at an interface in the museums' organizational structures and public programs. The participants were variously treated as a community in themselves, fulfilling the museums' need to demonstrate engagement with a defined group, as well as volunteers in the museums' own workforces, that is, organizationally included and responsible for decision-making and outcomes. It was a source of strength that each cohort was a mix of people from varied backgrounds and experiences, as they could learn from each other, as could the host museums. What they had in common as a community group was a curiosity about museums, history, art, or their local area. The idea of encouraging two-way conversations was a regular topic of discussion and essential to Citizen Curators developing their museum projects. Museums listened to Citizen Curators' ideas and ways of thinking and doing, and Citizen Curators in turn had to find ways to engender trust between themselves and the audiences of their projects.

In year 1, Falmouth Art Gallery Citizen Curators ran a contemporary art engagement project called Gut Reaction, partly with local academy children, partly with adults with learning disabilities. In turn, those participants created new artworks that were curated in the gallery by the Citizen Curators. In year 3 we expected trust-building through discussion to be limited by a remote and individualistic digital experience, but qualitative feedback, obtained through end-of-cohort evaluation questionnaires, suggested otherwise: "While the citizen curator may lack expert knowledge, we can nonetheless bring self-reflection, memories and rich childhood

fantasies into our research process;” “Personally, due to museums dark pasts, it is especially good to see a program set on removing the exclusivity of museums;” “Ethics helped me understand that to curate is to care—care for the collections, care for those who work with the collections and care for those who are viewing the collections.” Designing opportunity for discussion and active listening in online workshops and meetings was essential, and for those discussions to be just as mindful of the “museum baggage” people bring with them, as they might in a physical gallery setting. However, the limits of having only one facilitator for a large online group became apparent with reports of poor experiences in breakout rooms: “I was put in a group where two male participants talked over me and had such fierce and outdated ideas about decolonization.”

While the emphases of the program’s learning outcomes were always on quality of interaction, thought, and process, achieving a tangible outcome such as curating a display, seeing their written interpretation on a label, or writing a blog post was important to most of the participants. However, this came at a cost, namely, time and pressure on museums to support significant outcomes, and friction between Citizen Curators working intensely in unfamiliar environments. Recommending an ideal time commitment to Citizen Curators proved difficult, as in theory, it was up to each participant to regulate their own time spent volunteering at their museum outside of the core sessions. This caused some imbalances in museum groups when some were able to commit more time than others.

Year 1 saw the most dramatic adverse outcomes for participants, with one museum withdrawing their group from the scheme without completing, ostensibly because there were serious concerns that their Citizen Curators were choosing a project that they did not feel they had the ability to complete to acceptable standards. This moment was especially difficult because it directly confronted our values in cultural democracy that were predicated on shared and negotiated decision-making between museum officers and Citizen Curators. While my preference would have been to continue working with the group to help modify their plans, this possibility was removed by the museum, and in the spirit of the “experiment in cultural democracy” it was important that I did not take on the role of “rescuer.” The museum rejoined the program in year 2.

One Citizen Curator at another museum withdrew publicly at the last minute because of irreconcilable differences with the group and the museum. In this instance the participant felt it was unfair that a member of the Citizen Curators group was being paid (for another job at the museum) and felt that the museum did not make sufficient accommodation for her caring responsibilities, making decisions on the project without them. Another year 1 group did not achieve their plan because of scheduling problems at the museum, which did not consider or prioritize their Citizen Curators’ event. A further group dwindled until only two out of an original five were left, and the museum was left with substantially helping the remaining pair produce their exhibition. The reasons given for withdrawing from the program included a sudden lack of time because of a change in work schedules or new caring responsibilities, and early withdrawals after the first session deciding the opportunity was not really for them. A smaller number withdrew on points of principle, such as a feeling of unfair treatment by the museum, as above, or in one case because they felt aggrieved that the museum was not acting on ethical issues raised in the museum’s displays, for example, racialized caricatures.

Although these were the most dramatic responses to the pressure of supporting cocuration and accepting the challenge that comes from cultural democracy, frustration was palpable in all the groups: “The project was somewhat fraught but that is natural and team dynamics are unlikely to be repeated in exactly the same mix!” “Though at times there was frustration, in hindsight it is clear that everyone contributed as best they could with time available to them.” And one museum lead reflected, “I thought it would be a doddle but it hasn’t.” Across the years

museum leads were variously curators or collections managers, engagement and education officers, volunteer coordinators, or directors. Only two of the seven participating museums consistently put forward the same museum lead. Part of the reason for this was a quick turnover of staff at host museums, particularly those on short-term contracts, or the loss or change of jobs through redundancy and restructuring, or a desire to offer the opportunity to lead a group of volunteers to another colleague. In year 2, I had to step in as museum lead for one museum halfway through the program to see the group through to completing their projects while the museum underwent a restructuring process.

Collective learning from the pilot and year 1 suggested that expecting the fulfilment of major mission-critical outcomes, such as advertised exhibitions, was not appropriate for the Citizen Curators program. Years 2 and 3 emphasized processes over outcomes, which nevertheless resulted in great originality and creativity that were more closely linked to Citizen Curators' own inspiration and experiences, for example, a choir singer researched a 1920s Cornish military song; a retired medical professional and a potter made object films based on their professions; a former art and antique dealer challenged conversations about decolonization from their perspective; and a participant of Indian ancestry provided research to persuade their museum to make more visible historical photographs of Indian servants attached to a British colonial family associated with the historic house in which the museum now resides. Whereas digital outcomes rarely extended beyond social media takeovers in year 1, in years 2 and 3, podcasts were produced and research findings featured in museum blogs.

Specific cocuration outcomes also had a material effect on larger museum projects, for example, the curation of films for an animation festival and the production of a magazine to accompany a major World War II anniversary exhibition. As the size of outcomes became smaller, the range of outcomes became more diverse. The most sustained outcome was the creation of the Cornish National Collection Zine comprising content from across the cohorts (CMP 2021). This element of the Citizen Curators program was the most experimental part of all. As we have seen, the participants' own feelings about Cornish identity did not seem to have a bearing on the type and range of submissions. The cocuration of the collection happened over several stages in each cohort. The year 2 cohort were the workhorses of content creation and made nearly 90 percent of the submissions ranging from museum objects to buildings to songs; the third year determined the collection's tangible expression as a zine—an informal booklet-magazine. This zine was interpreted, designed, and illustrated by two former Citizen Curators.

Adapting and Adapting

To conclude, I offer some reflections on the systemic challenges of cocuration in the small museum context and how constant, agile adaptation was the key to success. First was competition for space at the museum, and the limited time museum staff could make available to the Citizen Curators. This was best observed in year 3, when, despite remote participation, most of the museums thrived with their Citizen Curators through regular digital meetings when there was less pressure to run operations in a building. When a little time and support was prioritized, this resulted in more fulfilling and promising outcomes for all, including impressive international collaborations (PK Porthcurno 2022). When this contact was limited, Citizen Curators failed to achieve a sense of belonging in their museums: “a better picture of where we fit in with them” and similar feedback was cited on multiple occasions as a feature that could be improved. Raising confidence in participants was the most successful element of the whole program and vindicated the adaptation of the program to be more process than outcome driven. Even the

seemingly simplest of opportunities could be transformational. A year 2 Citizen Curator reflected, “I wanted to thank you for everything; this entire experience has been really inspiring and I’ve never felt so confident to speak up. I’ve felt engaged and involved in my community.” A year 3 Citizen Curator said, “Creating a blog to overcome my fear, aversion and PTSD at sharing my opinions due to several traumatic events when I have been silenced, talked over or misinterpreted (frequent).”

The main complaint from participants themselves was around poor internal communication. In one instance the participating museum temporarily closed to the public because of financial difficulties, and the Citizen Curators only found out on social media. The flip side to this was the concern among museum leads, many of whom were part-time workers, to be sufficiently available to support Citizen Curators, some of whom could be quite demanding and unaware of the museum’s other pressures. By the end of the program, most museums better understood the time and effort it took to be truly inclusive, and it presented a reality check for funders and investors to realize that just opening your doors is not enough. Many Citizen Curators struggled to decide what to do and some structure such as a preexisting project or theme was found useful. Others struggled with accessing basic information from collections databases or even organizing a suitable time to work at the museum. It exposed museum systems as being too linear and too reliant on facilitation by just one person, who had many other priorities. It is fair to say none of the museums considered their participation in Citizen Curators to be an organizational priority. If their groups were helping them achieve other goals, particularly those connected to funded projects or program commitments, all the better, but the idea of centering the Citizen Curators in key museum decision-making was the least embedded aspect of the program.

The impact on individual participants was much more significant with very high satisfaction levels reported in evaluation. All 82 successful completers were surveyed after the end of the program in 2021 to find out how Citizen Curators continued to affect their lives: 89 percent had cited Citizen Curators in museum job applications, while 78 percent cited the program in other job applications. The program resulted in 20 percent of participants going into museum jobs or traineeships, nearly 20 percent into other jobs, and 23 percent onto further study; 23 percent remained regularly volunteering at their museum. All successful completers were able to use me and their museum leads for references for future job and course applications. This has enabled us to maintain our relationships with several Citizen Curator alumni, and for me to see if the curatorial downturn has been abated. A former Citizen Curator is now a museum colleague and led her own group of Citizen Curators in 2021. She recently wrote to me, “I really am so grateful for the Citizen Curators program and always attribute where I am today to it!”

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NOTES

1. The participating museums were Bodmin Keep: Cornwall's Army Museum, Wheal Martyn Clay Works, Royal Cornwall Museum, Falmouth Art Gallery, Museum of Cornish Life, Penlee House Gallery & Museum, and PK Porthcurno: Museum of Global Communications.
2. All Citizen Curators Annual Diversity and Inclusion Reports can be at <https://curatorialresearch.com/services/research/diversity-and-inclusion>.

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