

Ulster Folk & Transport Museum

Space title

The Education Room in Cultra Manor, the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum's Education Centre

Location

The Ulster Folk & Transport Museum is a national museum established in 1958 and funded by the National Museums & Galleries of Northern Ireland. The Museum is located in County Down, close to the centre of Belfast; it is home to a wide range of exhibit buildings forming a town and a rural area occupying 140 acres (56.6 hectares) of open countryside. Extensive transport galleries cover a further 35 acres (14 hectares).

Space location & dimensions

The Education Room measures 60m² and accommodates a maximum of 20 students taking part in art and craft activities. Groups are usually split into two, with one group using the tables and the other working at the looms or with other equipment.

Background to the project

Learning for all ages is central to the activities of the Museum. Primary schools are a major audience, but so too are adult learners – from City & Guild students studying textiles, to members of Northern Ireland's thriving Textile Guilds who come to study and use traditional craft skills.

Educational activities take place throughout Cultra Manor and at various locations in the Museum as a whole: in the Transport Museum, in the Folk Galleries and in the many exhibit buildings in the open-air museum. Primary school children re-enact Victorian court cases as part of their History Northern Ireland Curriculum studies in a recreated Courthouse in the town; this successful project was initially funded through the Clore Small Grants Programme. Also in the town is a residential centre used predominantly by school groups; the centre has living, sleeping and eating accommodation for 76, but no dedicated learning space.

The Museum attracts 180,000 visitors of which between 30,000 and 40,000 are educational. At peak times, the Museum can receive 8,000 visitors in a day.

In the early days of the Museum, Cultra Manor was used for offices, archives and libraries. Jonathan Bell, Head of Curatorial Services, explains that in the 1980s the Museum benefited from the political situation in Northern Ireland in the sense that money was given to 'bolster anything that held Northern Ireland together in any way'. This resulted in a big expansion of the Museum including the building of new administrative offices and an archive in a separate building.

The development process

The Education Room was created within Cultra Manor in the early 1980s, to replace a prefab classroom in the grounds (which is still used as a lunch area) and in response to growing demand from school groups – many visiting the Museum as part of the 'Education for Mutual Understanding' initiative. As Jonathan Bell explains, the education space was created from the Museum's reference library stacks: 'It was never really fitted-out ... it was multi-functional, left over from what was here before ... it obviously isn't ideal.'

The outcome

'Children love coming into the big house ... it's full of mystery ... having all the trees around ...' *Members of the Focus Group*

The education space has wood-effect walls, rather like a chalet or tree house, and large windows looking out onto parkland. Although the windows are large, they are low – as is the ceiling – and the result is a dark room, especially in the summer when the trees are in full leaf. The original library lighting is still in place, but has been updated recently with an energy-saving system which means that the lights go out if there is insufficient movement in the room – fine when the room is in use by young children, but not so good when older learners are working on sedentary activities.

The Education Room is located above the Manor's kitchen which can make the room hot and smelling of food. The room for education staff – located next to the kitchen – is 'like a cupboard' and has no storage.

The education team have first claim on the Education Room, but share this and the other spaces within Cultra Manor with corporate events and catering. No resources or work are displayed in the space for the main reason that the room cannot be locked up; it is used at weekends for catering which can add to the difficulties, since education staff and learners often have to clean tables before starting work.

The Education Room is used mostly for practical craft activities and makes use of the sink in the kitchen next door. Although there are plenty of power points, some do not work, which causes problems with craft activities that involve sewing machines or other electrical equipment. The poor artificial lighting is a problem for close work; sometimes, adult learners bring their own desk lights. Storage is a real problem in that there are no built-in cupboards and, of the cupboards that are available, one is reserved for the Textile Guilds who use the space almost every weekend. The room is also used for Adult Courses at weekends.



Features:

- The challenge of managing learning spaces which are also used for other purposes, e.g. catering
- The importance of a learning space as a place that users can 'own', where they can reflect on what they have seen and heard, and where they engage in practical activities
- The challenge of making the best of spaces which are not purpose-built
- The challenge of embracing new technologies
- The challenge of creating an active educational programme, rather than a programme which reacts to demand



Pieces of equipment, such as looms, are left out, but everything else is stowed wherever possible. It can be difficult for visiting tutors to manage the space; they have to find a member of the education staff for the cupboard keys, and locating the equipment they need for a class can be 'tricky' – as can the cleaning.

The education team feel strongly that, despite the inadequacies of the space, it is vital to have an Education Room for which students can feel a sense of ownership. It allows learners to reflect on the contents of the Museum, to concentrate on activities and to use technical equipment such as looms. The education space is a place where learning is taken seriously, a centre of excellence where learners can be taught to a high standard.

For such a large museum, providing dedicated space for education is a real problem. The catchment area for the Museum is vast and demand is already heavy: in fact, the Museum's educational activities are often booked up a whole year in advance. There is great potential in post-Primary education, but booking so far in advance is difficult, as is taking children out of school for the day.

The staff feel strongly that the learning capacity of the Museum is restricted by the spaces they have. Given the Museum's outstanding craft- and other collections, they would like to be able to work more with Further and Higher Education students. As Alison Campbell, the Museum's Head of Public Services, explains: 'It's the physical constraints that are going to make the difference between us being a really good education provider and being an excellent one.'

The education staff would very much like to be able to provide computers and Internet access, but this is an area where facilities in the Museum as a whole are severely limited – the education team has a joint email address and Internet access from only one computer. There is a slide projector and an overhead projector, but finding them can be a challenge, as can finding the pile of books needed to prop them up!

Lessons learned

The staff at the Museum are very clear about what they need and want:

- A purpose-built education centre located near the Museum's town area
- A 'meet and greet' area
- Access for all kinds of users including students with disabilities
- A multi-functional and flexible space with:
 - Storage space for study collections
 - Storage for materials and equipment
 - Sinks and 'rolling furniture'
 - A cloakroom
 - A lunch area
 - Dedicated education toilets for children
 - Dedicated toilets for visitors with disabilities
 - Wet areas
 - Dedicated display space for resources, stimulus materials and work
 - Furniture for education use only, including separate dry and wet work tables
 - Computers with access to the Internet and to the Museum's collections

- IT support
- Controlled lighting
- Controlled heating
- A lecture room

- Internal transport around the Museum

Key factors

'What we're doing is so diverse ... we do need to cater for smaller groups and larger groups and performing arts and traditional craft workshops and lectures.' *Alison Campbell*

The Ulster Folk & Transport Museum has the collections, the policies, the physical space, and the staff commitment and enthusiasm to offer much more to educational visitors of all kinds. Valerie Wilson, the Museum's textile curator, sees her job as 'making aspects of the collection more accessible to support the crafts programme, education workshops and exhibitions'. She sums up the situation well: 'We don't need to actually do more here; we just need to do what we're doing with maybe better resources to make best use of the creativity and the expertise in the staff and external tutors that we have.'

Arlene Bell, Head of Education, adds that the Museum needs to consult more, to evaluate the education programme and try to find ways of doing more: 'It's the learners as well as the teachers we should be asking.'



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