TEACHING IN LONDON MUSEUMS

Emotional labour as customer service[1]

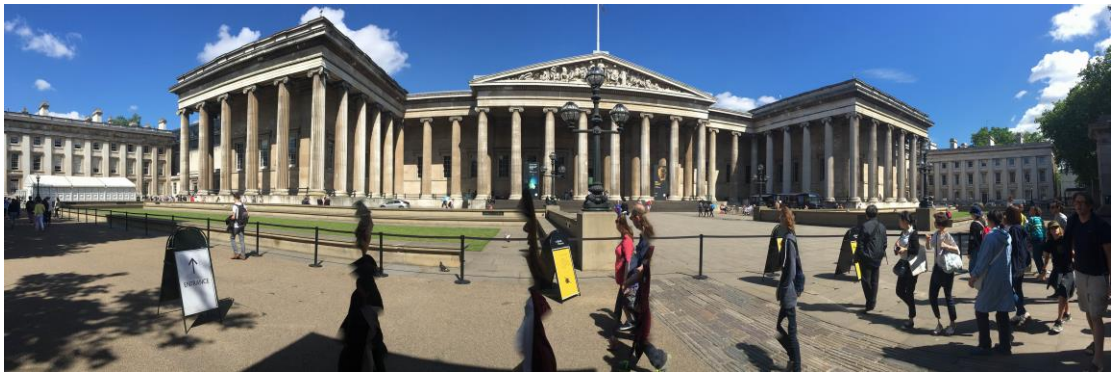

Fig. 1. Entrance to the British Museum in July 2016. Photograph by Makayla Cates.

Teaching off site is an utterly thrilling experience, but it comes also at a cost. I do not mean the extra money that an on-the-move university teacher needs to spend on water, coffee, sweets, sandwiches, and on all kinds of junk food or on pricier healthy options and low-calorie equivalents of energy boosters. Instead, what I have in mind is the psychological and physical demands that come with teaching an intensive course away from campus. Having completed the teaching of such a course in July 2016, the purpose of this paper is to reflect on the mobile experience of teaching and the mind-body consequences for me and my students. In particular, I will touch upon 'emotional labour', a term coined over thirty years ago by American sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild to describe the suppression of one's actual feelings for the sake of pleasing those you serve (Hochschild, 2012).[2] Hochscield's best-seller, 'The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling', first published in 1983 and reprinted several times since then, has had a tremendous impact on various industry sectors, including higher education (see, for example, Koster, 2011: 66-8, with references).[3]

[1]I am indebted to Dr. Susan Deacy for useful discussion, for pointing to me the concept of emotional labour, and for reading and commenting on an earlier version of the manuscript. I would also like to thank students Makayla Cates and Sead Perezic for permission to use their photographs. Any shortcomings are mine. All URLs were correct at 26.08.16.

[2]Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2012. *The Managed Heart. Commercialization of Human Feeling.* Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press.

[3]Koster, Shirley. 2011. The self-managed heart: teaching gender and doing emotional labour in a higher education institution, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 19:1, 61-77. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2011.548988

Course overview

The module that I taught was entitled 'Art in London Museums' and it formed part of Roehampton's Humanities programme for international students over the summer (see http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/International/Summer-School/). The course entailed visits to museums and art galleries in London for three out of the four teaching days per week. Hence, we had classes inside the British Museum, the National Gallery, and London's two Tates, Tate Britain and Tate Modern.

In our learning journey, we covered the story of art, and art's valorisation and politicisation through practices of collecting, displaying, and commissioning, from ca. 2500 BCE for Cycladic figurines to 1929 for Christian Schad's modernist painting 'Agosta, the Pigeon-Chested Man, and Rasha, the Black Dove.' Through our visits we explored the aesthetics and function of museums' architecture, how interiors and exteriors create narratives about art, nationhood, and urban regeneration. The effect of museum buildings, owing to their magnitude, habitable dimension, and place-making capacity, proves difficult, if not impossible, to teach using PowerPoint slides in a conventional classroom setting. Rather, you have to experience the built environment and interact with others inside it. The remaining one quarter of teaching (one day a week) took place mid-week on campus, in a room where the furnishings, chairs, desks, and white boards for writing and for projecting presentations, dictated the sterile, yet familiar, experience of being at university.

Each day comprised three hours of teaching, two before lunch and one after. Classes finished at 3 pm, so that the students, who were all from the US and most of them first-time visitors to the UK, could join other educational and recreational activities of their summer school programme. Unlike the Roehampton students that I taught in the winter and spring term this past academic year, who are enrolled on Classical Civilization degrees, the students for 'Art in London Museums' majored in a wide range of subjects, including Cybersecurity, Medicine, and Video Production. The content of the course, and the Classical world more generally, were new to them. As a result, I needed to adjust my teaching from day one by avoiding subject-specific terminology, such as 'pediment', and opting to discuss Winckelmann at the end rather than the beginning of the lecture series.

My objectives for the course may have differed from those of the students. For me, the course, like all university teaching, was about striving to deliver academic excellence, making students think independently and assisting them to achieve their maximum potential in their assessed presentations and essays. For students, notwithstanding their commitment to learning and desire for top grades, the module was one aspect of a hectic schedule that was packed with visiting places both in the UK and abroad, such as Glastonbury and Paris.

Travelling, over and above that required for 'Art in London Museums', had two consequences. Firstly, students experienced more and more fatigue as the course progressed over three weeks. Students were tired at the start of class each morning, due to rush-hour commuting and insufficient rest because of social outings the night before. Secondly, as students were away from campus almost continually, they had limited access to the library and little quality time for concentrated study. Understandably, for their essays, students relied heavily on online resources rather than books from the course reading list.

Teaching at home and away

Considering the issue of mounting fatigue, the sessions on campus (three in total, one per week) were well received by students and myself. By contrast to museum galleries, as I will sketch out below, our classroom was quiet and cool, since anyone could open windows to let fresh air in. In the first and second sessions, I used PowerPoint slides, handouts, and URL links to lecture and run group exercises. I appreciated the value of these standard teaching media, as they enabled me to cover more content from our course syllabus than I would have done off site. For a lecture on 'Art versus Craft', I solicited feedback in the form of posted notes with happy, indifferent, and unhappy faces that students could attach on flipchart paper. It may have proved difficult to orchestrate this task in a museum, given logistical needs for paper, space, and moving around. The colourful and eye-catching posted notes, moreover, would attract attention from passers-by. Such attention could interfere with the feedback process, biasing students' willingness to communicate how much they liked or disliked the course.

The third session on campus was dedicated to student presentations and there were, again, advantages in being in a familiar context. Students could use PowerPoint and perform their presentations before a known audience of fellow students and myself, rather than before random museum visitors who, customarily, stop and listen to people talking next to exhibits. Familiarity with space and people, moreover, helped with presenters' body language and voice projection, both of which were being assessed. For me, who had to mark presentations as they happened and write comments on the feedback form, it was invaluable to have a desk and some privacy at the back of the room. During this session, I circulated Roehampton's Module Evaluation Questionnaires to solicit confidential student feedback about the course as a whole. Completed questionnaires, which I do not get to read until they are processed centrally by the university, need to be sealed in an envelope and passed to departmental administrators straight away. Organising this feedback in a museum could appear to compromise confidentiality.

Evidently, teaching off site was going to be, and it really was, an encounter with the unfamiliar, placing demands on students' and my patience, resilience, and flexibility. London museums in July get exceptionally busy. Diverse crowds of visitors, ranging from school groups celebrating the end of the school year to tourists enjoying the peak of the holiday season, flood any available space in front of and inside museums. In view of the large volume of visitors and heightened security concerns, entry to the British Museum was regulated. Once past the Museum's main cast iron gates, you veered to the left and walked through a makeshift tent where security officers checked rucksacks (Figure 1). Apart from a good five-minute delay, and problems with starting our class punctually, this detour exposed us to what it meant to queue, to follow the crowds, and to be one with the crowds.

With the exception of Tate Britain, which was less busy, in all other museums there was a constant flow of slowly moving people, who talked in many different languages, took *selfies*, and listened to their audio or actual tour guides. Museums buzzed with life, resulting from people's gestural interactions, and, seemingly, achieved their objective to function as public spaces. Their vast rooms, such as the British Museum's Great Court or the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, resembled market squares, where people gather to be seen regardless of any intention to shop, eat, or meet friends. London museums offered a taste of urban life, at least as known in the Western world, by extending the boundaries of the museum and blending them with other public spaces and leisure activities in people's minds.

Against this backdrop of noise, moving bodies, and ill-defined real and imaginary spaces, I had to deliver university teaching to, admittedly, a small group of twelve students. I had to look after them, while being considerate of other visitors' and

teachers' needs. I was keen to find, for example, some suitable space to lecture before the three seated goddesses of the Parthenon's east pediment in the British Museum. I was successful in securing a nice vista and teaching there for ten minutes, only to realise afterwards that we were inconveniencing a tourist who wished to take pictures. I apologized and smiled. At the National Gallery, we left a room with must-see impressionists' paintings and returned later on, since a lecturer from the National Gallery was giving a talk there and her teaching, as communicated by security staff, took precedence over my group's and other viewers' interests.

As we moved from room to room to study artefacts and paintings in London museums, I endeavoured to figure out what the transience of teaching spots entailed. I had no designated classroom-stage to act and feel in control. Other museum goers could hear me teaching, and, on some occasions, volunteered to answer the questions that I posed to my students. I sensed that my class and my module were no longer mine, but shareable and under the spotlight. Yet, the people who curiously stopped and listened to my teaching for a while, before carrying on with their labyrinthine strolls, probably did not consider me a university teacher. In all likelihood, my conduct recalled roles in customer services, such as tourist guides.

Teaching and customer services

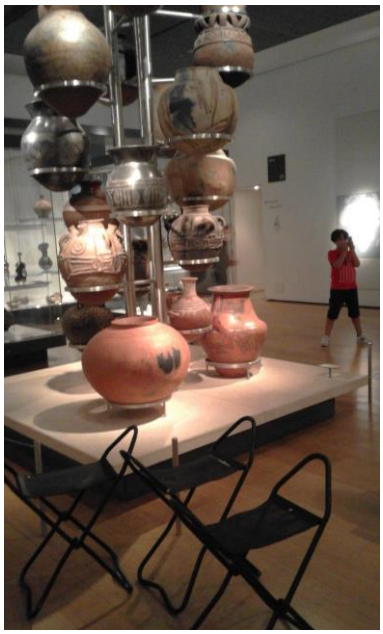

Fig. 2. Folding stools from our session at The Sainsbury African Gallery, British Museum. Photograph by Katerina Volioti.

Before, during, and after any teaching, which may have lasted from five to twenty minutes depending on the work of art, I had to interact with my students and others in the museum. Galleries were, predominantly, overcrowded, loud, and poorly ventilated. And my students remarked on the striking absence of air-conditioning, to which they were used to in the US. People, that is, my students and others, were excited to see the real thing, antiquities and art, rather than photographs that feature in textbooks, PowerPoint slides, and popular culture. That was the bright side of museum visits. Museum goers, nonetheless, tend to be genuinely tired, and unpredictable or irritable behaviours abound. To diffuse any potential tensions, and disruptions to teaching, I needed to step up a gear, or two, in being polite, apologetic, accommodating, patient, and friendly. I felt, moreover, that I was under pressure to strike a balance. On the one hand, I had to smile and make small talk almost continually. On the other, I had to be solution-oriented and concentrate on teaching so that we addressed the module's objectives.

During our visit to Tate Britain, for example, students communicated that they were exhausted from standing up. Gallery staff were eager to assist, but unable to locate any folding stools, which, mysteriously, had disappeared from their usual place of storage. I spent lunchtime walking around the Gallery, finding and reserving a dozen folding stools that we all used for our class after lunch. It made a huge difference for my aching legs, too, to be seated while teaching.

I made an effort to wear a 'customer-services hat' all the time, which may have confused other museum visitors as to my identity. The hat was indispensable also for concealing my fatigue, sleepiness, thirst, hunger, and discomfort with the July heat waves. Given our busy schedule and aim to discuss specific art-historical periods each day, such as Medieval and Renaissance Art on our first visit to the National Gallery, it

proved difficult to take a break as and when needed. Any break would involve a considerable amount of walking to the nearest café, toilet, or museum exit. At least twenty minutes would elapse before regrouping and reconvening with teaching. As we would have done on campus, we had to stick to one break after some fifty minutes of teaching, and this was tiresome. I had to be well equipped with smiles and soft skills to cope with adversity and fatigue, both students' and mine.

With increased levels of fatigue for us all by the third week, I opted for depth rather than breadth, cutting down on course material. For our class in Tate Modern we studied only four pieces, sitting in folding stools in front of the paintings. On our last day of the course, although not initially planned, I taught in The Sainsbury African Gallery of the British Museum, since this gallery was less busy and we could set up our stools there (Figure 2). The soft skills had been ingrained in me, empowering me to improvise and justify changes to the content and context of teaching.

In being flexible, it felt more like working in customer services than in academia. I practised, in one way or another, 'emotional labour', approximating the behaviours of professional service providers. For instance, flight attendants are required to muster cheer and hide their authentic feelings of fear at danger (Hochschild, 2012: 199). Recently, in November 2015, American features writer Rose Hackman has published on emotional labour and feminism in The Guardian,[4] where she poignantly states [spelling and italics as in original]:

> In a work context, emotional labor refers to the expectation that a worker should *manipulate* either her actual feelings or the appearance of her feelings in order to satisfy the perceived requirements of her job. Emotional labor also covers the requirement that a worker should *modulate* her feelings in order to influence the positive experience of a client or a colleague. It also includes influencing office harmony, being pleasant, present but not too much, charming and tolerant and volunteering to do menial tasks (such as making coffee or printing documents).

Hackman's words 'manipulate' and 'modulate' describe precisely how I felt, especially in coping with fatigue. I am sure that students, too, male and female, manipulated and modulated their emotions towards me and towards one another during our museum visits. Their minds and bodies managed extremely well with long days, which, for students, did not end at 3 pm when our sessions finished.

Emotional labour as shared experience for me, the teacher, and them, the students, highlighted a duality in our off-site interactions. On the one hand, the stress associated with being off site, which resulted, amongst other, from the substantial amount of background noise and the lack of space to stand or sit, necessitated professional and formal behaviours in a quasi customer-services manner. It was as if each one of us was in a military boot camp and we had to prove to ourselves, and to others in the group, how we survive under pressure. Smiles and super soft skills gave the impression that we did cope. On the other hand, off-site teaching on a day-to-day basis involved considerable informality and unpretentious behaviours. In clustering our folding stools close to one another, so as to hear and be heard, teaching mimicked the immediacy of casual chatting and socialising. Nothing substitutes for such a dynamic teaching environment. In Tate Modern, I gave my introductory talk in the corridor of Level 2 by the escalators, as that location had comfortable sofas where we

[4] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/08/women-gender-roles-sexism-emotional-labor-feminism

could all sit and gather together. Such seating arrangements are ideal for lifting any potential barriers between teachers and students.

Teaching and distractions

Fig. 3. 'Tree 2010', by Ai Weiwei inside Tate Modern. Photograph by Sead Perezic.

Our session at Tate's comfy sofas, which happened to be free when we were there, may have benefited from a relaxed, cosy, and familial ambience. As in all museum spaces, nonetheless, it was a challenge to concentrate. A lot was happening all around. In front of us, through the glass, we enjoyed a majestic view of the Turbine Hall, and of all the activity within it. Behind us, stairs moved scores of people up and down. As I talked, I competed for students' attention with all kinds of stories that Tate Modern may have prompted in students' minds. Much could trigger students' imagination and distract them from the content of my talk. There was the silent drama of an old power station, and the living drama of people coming and going.

To follow my talk, and, presumably, to combat distractions, a few students used their smart phones to scroll through the *pdf* with my detailed lecture notes that I had emailed the night before. Supplying students in advance with the lecture in full need not be restrictive for the teacher. Depending on circumstances, such as time available and students' reactions, I shortened or lengthened the content of my lectures on the

day. Although the soft copy was not an accurate record of everything that was covered, students communicated that it did help them greatly to concentrate and follow the teaching off site.

There is, however, a positive side to distractions. Certain types of learner absorb data by association. Some students may remember my talk, in part or in its entirety, precisely because they associated it with people, things, and images inside Tate Modern, including, most likely, entities unrelated to our course, such as a giant tree collage by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei (Figure 3).[5] Thus, being in a museum, on the terrain of art's and architecture's action created an invaluable learning experience.

Personal experience for students and teachers

'Art in London Museums', as a predominantly off-site course, resulted in an experience, presumably unique for each student, with which to supplement their learning about grand themes discussed in the course, ranging from the Enlightenment to the appropriation of Classical Antiquity and from Victorian society to German Expressionism. Students' encounter with art was not only a process of close engagement with works of art by observing details of style and technique that even top quality photographs fail to capture. Rather, the experience of fatigue, noise, and distractions in London museums all combined to create an understanding through which students remembered, processed, and contemplated about art in general and about specific works in particular. Lecturing in busy museums, therefore, fulfilled an ultimate teaching objective, namely, to encourage students to develop their own interests and modes of learning. For that reason, being off site, regardless of the fatigue and emotional labour, gives a sense of achievement to any university lecturer.

Surely, teachers must be well prepared and know the course inside out, since they may not be able to rely on good internet connection by means of a tablet or smartphone to access, for example, course material on Moodle. Having a hardcopy of lecture notes, images of works of art, and of a day's plan helps enormously. What helps even more is for the teacher to show flexibility and go with the flow, as determined by the group of students and other museum goers. There will not be sufficient time to cover everything you had in mind, and there is no reason to feel sorry about it. A practical piece of advice would be to relax in the evenings, since another busy day will start the following morning. Most importantly, a teacher should view the off-site experience as a personal learning journey, since they will discover qualities about themselves and have the opportunity to reflect upon their strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, and, above all, teaching as a vocation.

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[5] http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/ai-tree-t14630