

Whose Power?

Episode 3 - Abigail

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Project, group, participatory research, Leeds, participation, university, learning, realised, felt, research, talk, empowering, power, preservative, mentors, constantly, history, people, party, electricity

SPEAKERS

Bobby, Group members, Abigail Harrison Moore, Rahesa

Bobby 00:00

Welcome to Whose Power? a podcast exploring the power of participation in amplifying the voices of young people to create new knowledge and understanding. I'm Bobby, and I'm Rahesa and we're both members of the Preservative Party, a group of young curators based at Leeds City Museum.

Rahesa 00:17

Recently, we've been collaborating with Professor Abigail Harrison Moore at the University of Leeds, and together we've been exploring how best to empower young people and to break down traditional barriers to influence and drive the way museum exhibitions are curated and presented.

Group members 00:32

Create a space where they feel empowered. Yes, our voice is important. We're allowed to use it and be empowered to use it. It is good for young people to be in an environment where they are used to being listened to.

Bobby 00:46

So in today's episode of Whose Power? we're in the chair, and turning our regular podcast presenter into our podcast guest. We want to ask Abigail, what participation means to her, what barriers and challenges she has faced along the way, and how she has helped create new knowledge, bring about meaningful change through her research and work with us. So Abigail, why did you ask to work with the Preservative Party on this project and why on energy?

Abigail Harrison Moore 01:11

Okay, two really important questions. I think I'm gonna take the energy one first. I'm a Professor of Art History, which sounds like a really amazing thing. It is an amazing thing. And I never expected to be in this position. But I've been working for a long time, on late 19th century art history and mainly interiors, bumpy things, as I say. And that all came about because when I was a kid, my uncle was a gardener at a National Trust house called Standen. And I was fascinated by this house that I used to run around. And then I went to university to do a subject, I went to do English and discovered art history, because no one told a person like me that there was such a subject called art history. And realised that through

a module that I could actually write about Standen. And I'd always known that Standen was really important in the history of energy, because it was one of the first country houses in England to be purpose fitted for electricity. So a very, very early phase in the 1890s. The family, the Beale family at Standen, asked their designer Philip Webb, to enable them to have electricity at the house. And so I brought together, these two strands, the interest I have in interior designs and furniture, and the interest I had in that moment of change. And then for the last 10 years, I've been thinking about why we need to understand the history of energy, not as a history of men, industry and cities, but more importantly, as a history of people inside their homes, making major decisions about bringing in scary new power systems, and what we can learn from that for today. So I got to this point, and I'd published a book called *In a New Light - Histories of Women and Energy* with my very good friend, Ruth Sandwell. And I'd started thinking very much about why telling a different history of how electricity and gas came into the home might help us think about the future of energy, and how we all need to change the way that we bring different types of energy into our homes. And then I started thinking about the fact that I spent the whole of my career at the university because of my background and not feeling like I ever belonged at a university. I still pinch myself. I've just spent the weekend at Yale, and I spent the whole time going, why am I here? You know, this has seemed like a really strange, in the last 30 years, I have no idea really what I've done. But the one thing I've done a lot is work with young people, because I really wanted to find ways to enable other people like yourselves to think that they could come to a university to study, and particularly to study the arts and humanities, because I think a lot of the time we're told our subject doesn't matter. But what I've never done is bring them together as a research idea. I review a lot of grants. And I'm always aware of the fact that quite often researchers decide to create a new wheel every time they create a new research project. And they go out and they go, I'm going to work with young people. So I'm going to write a project and go and find a group of young people and I'm going to get them to come and talk to me. And then I'm going to do something, and I thought well, that's that's not going to work. It needs to be a group who already are doing interesting stuff who I might be able to learn from. And I was very lucky that because I've worked in Leeds for all these years, I've also worked with Leeds Museum and Galleries for all these years, and the reputation of the Preservative Party was already well out there. You were all well known as being superb, and being brilliant people who were shaking up what youth participation in museums looked like. And I was very lucky that when I went to the team at these museums, and particularly I talked to Esther, who at that time was facilitating the Preservative Party, they said I'll go and consult the group. And from that moment I knew what this was going to be like, didn't quite know until I met you all, because it was a very different group that I arrived in January 2023 to work with. But that's why I asked to work with the Preservative Party, because I knew already, before I even met you that I'd learned an awful lot from you. Every day, every week, it changes because you teach me so much.

Bobby 05:24

So, obviously, you came to us with a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge about your topic, and a lot of experience working with young people. But do you think that you had an idea of what this was going to look like when you arrived? And do you think that looks anything like what we actually have now?

Abigail Harrison Moore 05:45

Sort of, but pretty much no. I'm a I like order, as you all know, and I had a brilliant work plan. Oh, it was perfect. I mapped it all out. And I'd got the money on the basis of this amazing work plan. Yeah, I tore that up within about 14 seconds of meeting you all, because what I hadn't realised when I wrote the project, because you hadn't done it by that point was, I would be joining you at the point when Overlooked was launched. And so I arrived, just at that moment where you as a group, were learning from the last 13 years of participants in the group had curated this major show at Leeds Museum. And that was fantastic. But it also meant that the first six months of the project, was me going, how did you do that? That's amazing. Oh, I'll come down to London with you to see you get another prize. While we weren't doing the project, as I envisioned, we didn't really start doing the project, as I envisioned for at least six months. I don't think really until nine months into the project did we do that. What it meant was the time when I was having to start to really think about how do we do ethics? How does participation work? You were in this experience, talking about what you'd done, as curators and I just learned, so the first period was much more about learning to trust you all which sounds, you know, really learning that when you said, this will happen or we'll do this, it will happen. And we'll do it. But also learning to trust the process that you had already developed and becoming a part of that process, rather than trying to impose a process. So I've learned a massive amount about participatory research, you have that plan. But then you have to be totally willing to change that plan.

Rahesa 07:33

Working with a large group like ours, with a lot of different ideas and backgrounds and dynamics. Do you ever find that there can be conflict when collaborating on these projects? And how do you navigate these challenges?

Abigail Harrison Moore 07:47

That's a really, really important question. And it's something that I'm still learning, we're learning together. And that's the key point of what we're doing. We're constantly learning, we're constantly testing, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't work. When I originally wrote the application, I was really, I've been in the world of universities, a long time I've been a head of school, I've run lectures. So I was very used to going into spaces as a leader. You know, that was what I'm known as at the university, I was appointed Professor through a scheme called Academic Leadership. But with this project, I knew from the beginning that I had to find a really effective way of devolving leadership in a way that still had a structure. So you still felt that you knew what we were doing and when we were doing it, and you felt that you could look to me and ask me questions of it. But at the same time, I could give you leadership responsibilities, you could lead me and mentor me. And when I designed the application, I was directed to a really important essay called the Structure of the Structureless, which was written in the 1970s through a feminist cooperative in Leeds, as feminists were starting to think about how they work together. And how you made sure that you didn't have a strict hierarchical situation where somebody was in charge, and everybody else had to follow. But at the same time, you were able to move forward because everybody knew how you were moving forward. And I used that and the support I had from one of my colleagues, Jade French to think about how I might structure a devolved system of leadership within the programme. So I originally envisaged mentors. And also I was very aware from talking to Esther as the person who developed the group, that there was a number of the group who were ageing out, in the fact that the group is technically meant to finish at 24. And so there was a lot of people who've been really actively involved in the Preservative Party, who needed to

continue to develop their CV and move forward. So we designed this mentorship scheme and it also meant that we could pay our mentors on the programme, which is really important. Now again, we've learned a lot about that because the structures of employment meant that we didn't actually get to employ our mentors for the first nine months of the project, but now you're in the role. And so what we're actively doing all the time is thinking about how we together as a group of mentors who know the group really well, who've worked with the group for a long time, how they mentor the group, but also, and as importantly, how they mentor me. So it's fantastic, because I always have members of the group telling me how things might work. So if there is a moment of conflict, and there will be, you know, we come to group on a Thursday evening, and we bring our lives to it, we might be tired, we might have had a bad week, we might be stressed, we might be anxious, all of us bring ourselves to it. And that's why it's really important that within the space there are, there's constantly a conversation between us about how is this operating? How do we move forward together? But how do we move forward in a way that if conflict occurs, or if somebody wants to challenge something, they can do that in a trusted safe way. So that's been actually one of my biggest parts of learning on the project from you all.

Bobby 10:58

We talked a fair bit in our episode about what it means to bring ourselves to Pres Party, and what it means to bring ourselves to our projects. Do you think that through working with Pres Party, your concept of yourself as a researcher, and how you define that boundary between research professional and personal has changed?

Abigail Harrison Moore 11:21

Totally! You have as a group, and this project has totally changed my life. And my daughter's the same age as most of you in the group, and is going through a similar phase in her life as she moves forward. She was the one who first, kind of held a mirror up to me, and you know, she knows me well, I've been her mom for 19 years. And she said to me, and forgive the pun, when we're talking about electricity and energy, she said, your spark's come back, mum. Because having been here a long time, and having been a researcher and a head of school and done admissions, what you've shown me is the things that really matter to me. The things have driven my whole career from when I first started in education, I used to work in my first ever job in education was working in a high security prison. I've loved every minute and every student group I've ever worked with, you know, it's been an absolute privilege. And it continues to be a privilege to work with students at the University of Leeds, and with young people across the country and across the world through museums. Everything's changed through working with you as a group, I constantly thought of myself as a failure. The box, which was called research, I've written books. That hurt, they were hard work, I never felt I belonged. I always say I'm a 2:1, B kind of girl. And that's, you know, that got me into this world. But I've never felt clever enough to be an academic. But what I've realised is through working with you is cleverness is it's got multiple ways and multiple understandings. And Bobby, you've spoken about this in your episode, you've helped me see that what it is that empowers me, which is empowering you is enough. And this is the rest of my research career. And I'm so grateful that a few of you, maybe not all of you, but a few of you said I'm never allowed to leave. And I hopefully we'll always be like that because I never want to leave the Preservative Party, because I learned from you every single week. And I'm very, very grateful for this. So participatory research yay.

Rahesa 13:23

It's interesting that you never felt smart enough to be an academic. What do you think your barriers to participation have been?

Abigail Harrison Moore 13:30

When I work with you as a group, I'm very aware of how enabled I've been, you know, I've had an a fantastic educational career. I had parents who, well, my mum was the first of her family to go to university, my father certainly didn't. My daughter's father left school just before their 16th birthday and hadn't had a chance to go into education. So I've been very, very aware as a white, middle class woman from a very nice town in Yorkshire. I've had multiple enablers in my life. Once I left school, I went to a university and it was amazing university and I had a brilliant time and my friends were made there are still my best friends and my daughter's Godmothers. But that was the first time I'd encountered the class system. And I've spoken about this elsewhere. I had never felt like I didn't belong until I went to university, and I suddenly realised that because my parents hadn't paid for my education, I've been living in a bubble. And I didn't realise there were these other people who've been so much more enabled and seemed so much more confident than me. I didn't know about debating society. So I didn't know that when I sat in an art history seminar in first year and they all seemed to know about Renaissance Art. They didn't know any more than I did. They will just they'd been taught how to speak. And that experience did teach me how to speak and I am grateful for it, because I do think the thing that's helped me overcome the barriers have been consistently knowing that communication was important. You know, I always say to you all I am constantly trying to be a swan while appearing like a duck. And one of the great things about this project is we do check ins all the time. I do check ins with Jordan, as the group facilitator, I do check ins with you. And most of my check ins are constantly about, I'm not sure that went right, or I'm not sure. And those constant chance to reassure ourselves is something that's become really important and really important part of the project. So I guess my barriers to participation, why I felt they were barriers to participation, were about a sense of myself, not belonging. And then I came and worked at a university, where everybody seemed like the people I went to my university with. We've worked very hard to try and overcome that. But still, I was looking at some statistics recently, and women professors at the university is still a much lower number than men professors. And when you add into that women who've had children, and then when you start to look at all the other social characteristics, so for example, if you looked at black women professors, the statistics are so small. So still within this world that I am very privileged to work within, I still am constantly made aware that I am an outsider, which is what drives me and most of the people who I really respect who call the research they do participatory, and most people I work with in museums, who do projects like the Preservative Party, is because they all feel like outsiders and I think actually feeling like outsiders, is what works for us. Because we're constantly trying just to be kind to each other, to accept each other's difference, to learn from each other, to know each other's stories as much as we possibly should and can do within those spaces, and to work to each other's strengths.

Bobby 16:42

This is more of a comment than a question. I do completely agree that the ability to communicate empowers people in hugely different ways. I had oracy lessons at my school, and that, having the ability to blag and sound smart in my back pockets, very useful. But one of the things I love about Pres Party is, it's a very honest way of communicating because everybody's bringing their experience and

their method of communicating, which is completely different for so many people. So we create something that is a much clearer and much more dynamic way of discussing things than if we were all trying to sound smart all the time. And so I think you're right, being an outsider, and not being worried about what you're going to say, because there have been situations where maybe you were worried, and then you got over that is the best way to work, in my opinion.

Abigail Harrison Moore 17:34

Absolutely. And that kindness extends to the fact that when I get it wrong, and we all get it wrong sometimes, one member of the group, any of you will very gently and very kindly point out where I might do it better next time. I think for me, that is the greatest success of this project so far, is you feel able and confident to say to me, maybe next time try it this way. Or if I say, well what do you think went wrong in that point? And you will say, maybe it was this. And it's done in an honest, safe, kind way. Maybe it is because we all come into that space, feeling slightly outside of it. And then also something that I think we'll talk about throughout the project is how objects also enable us to have those safe conversations, because we can all see an object, hold an object, engage with an object and have a conversation around it and bring something to it, bring our stories to it.

Bobby 18:29

Being able to talk to you and describe how we might change the way we talk, that is, in itself a form of power.

Rahesa 18:38

Why do you think participation is so helpful to how we understand power?

Abigail Harrison Moore 18:45

Participation done well has power at its heart, but it's not power to close off. It's not power to shut down, its power to open up. So participation done well, we talk a lot about empowering. I think that's been the great thing about this project, I didn't realise when I wrote the project in any way whatsoever. I mean, although I called the original application, empowering women, the fact that you as a group went - not sure about that, but what about Whose Power? And I was like, oh yes, those two words together Whose Power? speaks to who has the power, who has the power to create change, who owns the power? It also says, Whose power? You know, it sort of throws it in the end and goes it doesn't, you know, in this space, power is something that's dynamic, it's devolved, when we share each other's voices, which is why we chose to do a podcast as part of our research method and our research and our research outcomes, these words that we use in universities, is because talking together is about constantly being aware of how power works.

Rahesa 19:51

Where do you think participatory research is heading towards?

Abigail Harrison Moore 19:56

That's a really, really good question. I as I said, I spend a lot of time reviewing applications and reading texts, its part of the job of an academic. And I consistently now see the words participation, co-curation, co-creation, co-design, seeing them used a lot in business world in selling, you know, and in ways of

trying to make us feel like we're being engaged. But actually, it's about selling something to us. And I think the future of participatory research is a longer, much more nuanced, much slower, much more careful conversation about what it is we actually mean by participatory research. And as I say, I know, I'm very lucky in the role that I'm in, because I have this weird title professor, it does give me the chance to go and talk to a lot of the people who are making decisions about, for example, funding, and how we fund this sort of research. And the first thing I'm saying to them is, we need to build in time, we need to build in nuance, we need to build in space, you can't do participation in three weeks, you can't do it in three years, you can't probably do it in 30 years, I hope I can do it in 50, because I'm falling off this mortal coil at the end of that. But it does take time. And that's quite difficult in a world where it's rush, rush, rush, you know, it's short term funding to move ourselves forward. And we need to completely change. And there's lots of really good research and really good researchers at the moment, challenging us to change the systems. How we work in museums, how we work in universities, to slow us down, to make space, to build trust, to listen carefully, to consider consent, and to take care. So that's where I'd like to see participatory research going. And what you've all taught me is how much care is needed. I knew it. But you have really shown me that. And so I think that's for me, where I want it to go and where I feel I have a role and where we have a role. And that's one of the reasons why we're doing this is because we want to share our learning and our findings. We don't know it all, we certainly don't, just our own experience. But by sharing our experience, then hopefully we can continue to ask for the time to do this sort of work because it's so important.

Bobby 22:16

Well, thank you, Abigail. Thanks to you, the listeners for joining us on this episode of the Whose Power? podcast which was presented by Bobby and Rahesa in collaboration with Leeds University, Leeds City Museum and the Preservative Party.

Rahesa 22:31

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Bobby 22:43

If you've got a question or a comment about what you've heard in this episode, you can find the Preservative Party on X at @presparty. We'd love to hear from you.