

Events Toolkit: Case study

Name and department: Dr Isabel Davies, English and Humanities

Title of event: Conceiving Histories Exhibition

- **Can you describe the event that you held (eg detail the event, what did you do, attendee numbers, subject area, why did you do it)?**

We put on a month-long exhibition of new artwork, exploring the history of ‘un-pregnancy’ (reproductive disappointment, delay, and uncertainty). This was the result of two years of collaborative work between Isabel Davis, a Birkbeck literary historian, and a visual artist, Anna Burel. 1372 people attended the exhibition and we held a number of coinciding events during the time of the exhibition: tours for educational groups, a staff and postgraduate-student reading group session and combined gallery visit, an academic symposium, and a gallery talk as part of the *Being Human* festival.

We held this exhibition to embed a public engagement strategy into our research: to trial our collaboration, to find out what responses we would get to our work and to gain insight into potential research futures.

- **What did you want to achieve by holding the event?**

We wanted to help break a cultural silence around un-pregnancy, exploring fantasies of parenthood and pregnancy, and challenging assumptions about the triumph of reproductive science and technology.

We wanted to get confirmation about the value of our work and gather responses to it which would help us shape our research future.

We wanted to use the exhibition to raise the profile of our work with potential stakeholders.

- **What worked well in the planning, design and delivery of the event?**

The team of people – me and Anna – but also support from the Peltz Gallery, Natasha and Annie, technicians, and other colleagues who pulled together to make things smooth.

Dedicated Twitter feed, developed painstakingly with a tweet a day, engaging with communities of people who are trying to conceive, undergoing IVF, living with involuntary childlessness, campaigning for change in fertility health, as well as academics, arts organisations, charities, and other partners.

- **What were the main challenges that you faced?**

Money – several grant applications we put in failed. We ended up having to reduce our budget (for example using IKEA rather than bespoke frames) and putting little pots of money together from internal funds and a Kick Starter campaign.

Evaluation – we didn't do this very well because we didn't think about it early enough. A vintage post-box that we bought to gather responses got lost in the post (!) and we were too last minute to rethink. We forgot to take forms to some of our events and should have had a much more integrated and creative approach.

Getting attention (eg from the press) and audiences is difficult. It is about fostering links and that takes time and detracts from the other work you need to do.

- **What top tips would you give to those considering running a similar event?**

Think about evaluation before you start and enlist the support of the Public Engagement team early. Be creative about evaluation.

Set up a Twitter account that is separate from your personal Twitter feed and only tweet on exactly related topics and tweets.

Enlist the support of any partners you can get interested in your work. Pull in any connections you have.



Dr Isabel Davis and Anna Burel at the Conceiving Histories exhibition

© Dominic Mifsud 2016.