1807 COMMEMORATED

LEARNING FROM THE BICENTENARY -
A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Community Toolkit

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THE UNIVERSITY *of* York

Introduction

This toolkit is based on the work of the 1807 Commemorated project, based at the University of York. The project received funding through the Arts and Humanities Research Council's, Knowledge Transfer Fellowship Scheme.

The 1807 Commemorated project conducted 121 semi-structured interviews with museum staff, policy makers, academics, community activists and community groups involved in consultations over the development of exhibitions portraying the history of Britain's role in the enslavement of Africans. These exhibitions included both permanent and temporary exhibitions, which were developed to either mark, or opened during the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade within the British Empire. These 121 interviews comprised:

- 88 museum professionals (from national, regional and local museums).
- 24 interviews with community representatives.
- 11 academics/activists/policy makers.

In addition, a one-day workshop, attended by 11 individuals from community groups who had been involved in consultation processes with museums for the 1807-2007 bicentenary, was held in May 2008. During the workshop participants discussed their experiences and perceptions of working with museums in consultation programmes.

Drawing on the information and experiences obtained from the interviews and the workshop, this toolkit has been developed to help guide practice and facilitate equitable debate regarding the community consultation programmes undertaken by museums, libraries and archives.

This toolkit is specifically developed from the experiences of museum staff and community groups concerned with developing exhibitions and displays addressing traumatic and/or contested histories. However, we consider that it has a general applicability to a range of community consultation processes.

The toolkit is also based on a sequence of recommendations made by an 1807 Commemorated report on community consultation. This report can be found on the main 1807 Commemorated website.

This toolkit should *not* be regarded as a prescriptive checklist of what to do, but rather provides issues to consider about the consultation process. It is based on the philosophical acknowledgement of the importance of substantive community consultation and a belief that consultation should be equitable and honest. We also suggest that the aim of consultation should not only be concerned with facilitating the development of exhibitions or other projects, but should also aim to develop a longer term relationship or *partnership,* at the heart of which is considered and respectful dialogue between all parties.

Toolkit aims

The toolkit:
- Is a self-assessment tool for use by museums, libraries, archives, and by community groups.
- Should facilitate self-reflective and critical practice, and identify areas where communication between heritage/museum staff and communities of interest could be improved.
- Identifies key issues to think about in order to develop community consultation and engagement strategies.

This toolkit is based on

- The principle of equitable dialogue and negotiation between groups.
- The observation that consultation is *not* a process of 'telling', but must entail *engagement* and *dialogue*.
- Community engagement as an integral tactic in addressing social inclusion, which should address and challenge existing processes of exclusion.
- Community engagement is fundamental to the development of exhibitions and other projects of representation, and should be a priority in the development of controversial, traumatic and dissonant exhibitions and other projects.
- Community engagement as a vital, ethical consideration when democratising museums, libraries and archives.
- The recognition that community consultation is emotionally and intellectually difficult, and that there may be irreconcilable and fundamentally different values and agendas held by community groups and museum/heritage staff.
- The observation that there is no one model on how to undertake consultation, and that the consultation process chosen may depend on the aspirations of *both* museum/heritage professionals *and* community groups.
- The principle that community engagement should have mutual benefits for museum/heritage professionals, their institutions and community groups.

Why undertake community consultation?

There are a range of ethical and practical issues that need to be considered when engaging with community groups. Community engagement or consultation can:

- Help to promote equality of opportunity and social justice.
- Address social exclusion.
- Facilitate audience development.
- Meet the requirements of Government policies and funding bodies.

- Provide wider recognition within the museum and heritage sector that communities have a stake in the way their heritage is interpreted and used.
- Help facilitate the development of exhibition content.

Basic Considerations of Consultation

An extensive literature on community consultation in heritage and museum studies now exists (see selected further reading below). Although this has tended to focus on issues concerning Indigenous peoples, a range of basic observations can be drawn from this literature, about developing useful and successful consultation processes. The experiences of both museum staff and community representatives interviewed as part of the 1807 Commemorated project reaffirmed many of the points made in this literature. Basic considerations of community engagement include:

- Consultation aims:
    - The aims of the consultation process need to be communicated clearly. This is because the aims of museum/heritage staff, and the communities with which they engage, may be quite different. It is therefore important that both staff and community representatives clearly communicate their aims and aspirations to all parties involved in the consultation process.
    - Be prepared to negotiate the aims of the consultation process at the outset.
- Boundaries of Consultation:
    - Clear boundaries to the consultation processes need to be negotiated and defined, for both staff and community representatives, at the outset.
    - The model or process of consultation and engagement should be discussed and negotiated with the communities involved.
- Outcomes:
    - Museum/heritage staff will need to think about why communities may want to be involved and what communities may wish to achieve by the process. What will the outcomes be, not only for the museum/heritage resource, but also for each of the community groups involved in consultation?
    - Museum/heritage staff need to be clear and honest with communities and their representatives about what the consultation process can achieve. It is important to be clear about any limitations and logistical issues staff may face. This includes not only the limitations of money, time and physical resources, but also conceptual, political and philosophical limitations, pressures and considerations.
    - Identify outcomes that are important not only in practical terms, such as the design and content of the exhibition, but also professional outcomes, which may include the development of long term relationships, or partnerships, with community groups.
- Dialogue:
    - Consultation must involve negotiation.
    - Not only the aims, but also outcomes, nature, duration, and structure of the consultation process should be open to negotiation.

- Dialogue must be honest and transparent.
- Any limitations to the consultation process:
    - Institutional limitations should be communicated clearly.
    - Be aware that community representatives will also face a range of practical constraints on the time and energy they can devote to the process.
    - Consider whether or not you, your staff or your institution possess the skills to undertake consultation? If not, what skills do you need to develop?
    - Do the community groups you intend to consult with have a clear understanding of the way your organisation or institution works? What training, resources or support will be needed to transfer knowledge about your organisation/institution to communities?
- Reporting back:
    - Feedback from audiences and colleagues about the final project or exhibition should be reported back to communities.
    - Keep your colleagues apprised of developments and outcomes of the consultation process.
    - Museums/heritage institutions must put in place reporting strategies and support mechanisms for staff engaged in community engagement.

This last point is based on the results of interviews with museum staff who often reported on three key issues of stress and tension with community consultation programmes. These were:

- The anxiety in dealing with the frustration and anger felt by some community groups, caused by the previous lack of recognition of histories and legacies.
- The pressure of attempting to address community wishes and aspirations at the same time as meeting the requirements of their institutions and/or funding bodies. Addressing community aspirations occasionally required institutions to rethink, or reorient, their expected outcomes. Staff undertaking community consultation therefore found it very difficult to negotiate the tensions created by disparate community and institutional expectations.
- This situation was often exacerbated by the pressure and tensions of attempting to discuss community engagement outcomes with colleagues and institutions who had little understanding of, or commitment to, community engagement. It is important to note that some institutions had failed, at a practical and policy level, to recognise that community consultation was not simply a 'box-ticking' exercise, but had raised expectations that institutions would respond to the consultation process.

Thus, it is important that institutions, alongside their staff, not only make a strong philosophical and practical commitment to community engagement, but also develop mechanisms to support their staff in this process.

When do you undertake Community Consultation?

Research has shown that most communities should be engaged from the very beginning of any exhibition or project and that their involvement should continue until the completion of that project. This might necessarily mean that community consultation occurs at the point when decisions are being made on whether or not a project or exhibition should be developed, alongside the aims, scope and nature of a project. Consultation should also be conducted during the final design stages.

Questions to consider include:
- Do you wish to fundamentally engage with communities, and if so why?
- Do you simply want confirmation of your aims and exhibition content?
- Do you think long-term relationships with communities are important?
- Is this a one-off exhibition or project, or will you be dealing with these issues in the long-term?
- Are you willing to accept 'no'?
- Are you willing and open to the idea of meaningful negotiation?
- Do you see your role as facilitating the development of community voice and expression?
- Do you see your role primarily as educator or informer?
- Is it important for you to have the final say in exhibition content?
- What are the social and local agendas that may have an impact on consultation practice?
- What resources and philosophical support does your institution provide individual staff? Do you have the support of your colleagues?
- What is your standing within local communities? How are you perceived by the local communities you wish to consult?

Whom to consult?

This will depend on your initial aims for consultation. Issues to think about include:

- How do you define the community? How do communities define themselves?
- Communities may not be defined or constrained by geographical locations. Community membership may be spread outside of the catchment area of your institution.
- Remember majority groups can also be a community.
- Communities are not homogeneous, and diversity will exist within communities.
- It can be easy to listen only to the most vocal of community representatives, but how representative are they? To what extent have you thought about the need to consult not only the diversity of community groups, but also diversity within community groups?
- There may be groups who do not wish to engage. Can you respect that? Have you considered the reasons why people may not want to engage?
- There may be community groups who are worried about what consultation may mean, and what it may lead to. Have you thought

about the reasons this may be so? Are you prepared to talk to communities about these concerns?

Scope of Engagement/Consultation

The remit of consultation may be defined by yourself or in consultation with community groups. The point here is to be clear and transparent about the processes institutions are engaged in or planning to be engaged in:

- Define the boundaries of the consultation process, but also be prepared to negotiate these.
- Define the exhibition's or project's boundaries, but also be prepared to negotiate these.
- State clearly the aims and aspirations of the project and be prepared to negotiate these.
- Think about and assess the perceived significance of the proposed exhibition/project among the museum and/or community groups. How will this affect the aims and scope of consultation?
- Be clear about the intended outcomes for a) the museum/institution b) yourself, c) the community. Be prepared to negotiate these.
- Be clear about where the ownership and responsibility for the exhibition or project lies and if you and/or your institution are prepared to share this or not.

Types of community consultation

The various models of consultation used by museums, which were identified by the 1807 Commemorated project were:

1. Small consultative groups: These were often formed by personal invitation from museums, but could also be formed through open calls through the media, community networks or *community* nominations.
2. Large consultation groups: Open invitations advertised in local newspapers were usually used to recruit consultation groups. The groups formed through this were often between 30-40 individuals, and were quite diverse. However, membership of the larger consultation group could vary through time.
3. Some museums used a marketing oriented approach, where museum staff interviewed individuals and/or used focus groups.
4. Some museums developed specific sub-projects, sometimes running alongside the exhibition (such as art projects, oral history projects etc), which communities organized and/or ran with support from museums.

Occasionally, more than one model was used at a museum. Other models described in the literature on community consultation include, identifying community organisations, such as heritage trusts, historical societies, political or other representative groups, and inviting delegates from these to form consultation groups, and/or consulting directly with individual organisations.

The model chosen will depend on the aims of the consultation programme. It will also depend on issues such as community diversity, the individuals involved, local context, resources of the institution, the reputation of the institution within the community, resources available to communities and the degree of interest or engagement expressed by the communities.

Points to consider when choosing a model, or developing your own method of consultation or engagement, include:

- How representative is the model/method chosen of the communities with which you wish to engage. Does it reflect the diversity of communities associated with your project?
- To what extent are you willing for the consultation process to influence the exhibition and its outcomes?
- To what extent will the methodology chosen allow certain personalities, or professional backgrounds, to drive the process? Do you have you strategies in place to ensure equity?
- To what extent are your perceptions of how the 'community' is defined and your previous experience with community groups, influencing your choice of models?
- Are you willing to negotiate with the communities involved regarding the consultation model that should be adopted?
- Do you have flexibility to change the process in response to developing needs or issues?
- Have you considered the feasibility of each model for the communities involved and have you taken in to account the pressures that each model may bring to bear on the communities themselves?
- Are you looking for affirmation of your project, or a partnership with communities?
- *Where* will the consultation take place? Have you considered issues of power and place? It may be that your museum or institution is not necessarily the most effective place for consultations and meetings to occur.
- What practical issues do you face in terms of training, time, money, and other resources?

Practical issues

Practical issues will always constrain the consultation/engagement process. These issues need to be acknowledged at the outset by all parties. It is particularly important that the staff of museum/heritage sites are transparent about their practical and professional limitations and constraints. It is also important for heritage/museum staff to be aware that communities themselves may have similar constraints, particularly in terms of time, financial resources and emotional resources, and that these can alter throughout the course of a project/consultation process. Issues to consider in these situations include:

- Are you remunerating community consultants/representatives? Communicate clearly to the communities why you are or are not able to remunerate.
- Do the representatives of the communities need training on how museums operate and on the exhibition process?
- Do museum/heritage staff need training in negotiation techniques and in understanding diversity and equity issues?
- What resources do you have available to commit to community consultation?
- Do you have the support of the wider institution?
- Do you have the support of communities?

Conflict - why it arises and how to deal with it

Conflict can occur at any stage of consultation and for many different reasons. It is inevitable in any negotiation, and should not be viewed as problematic. Indeed, conflict should be considered as an integral part of the consultation/engagement process. Conflict can sometimes be constructive, especially if approached honestly, and with the willingness to discuss and debate openly. Be aware that conflict may not just occur between heritage/museum staff and communities, but may also occur *within* the community and *within* institutions, during the consultation process. Issues to consider include:

- Have you considered the potential areas of conflict and dissent?
- What strategies do you have in place to recognise and then mediate conflict?
- If conflict occurs, consider why conflict has occurred and between whom?
- What is at stake for each party in the conflict?
- A desire to get parties to a conflict to compromise to resolve that conflict may engender more conflict and dissent. Compromise between *all* parties may not *always* be the answer.
- At what stage will you consider the problem and differences being expressed as irreconcilable?
- What and when are you or your institution willing to compromise?
- Have you identified the most important outcomes and issues that you are not willing to compromise or renegotiate? Have you, and indeed are you willing, to communicate this clearly?
- What are the core issues for community groups? Have you considered why these issues are important?
- What social justice issues underlie or underpin the positions taken by the parties in any conflict?
- What social justice issues is the exhibition addressing, or is the exhibition able to address?
- Can you reflect the disagreement in the exhibition?
- To what extent are you willing to relinquish institutional authority and at what point is it important to maintain institutional authority? Why is this the case? Have you communicated this assessment clearly to the parties involved in any conflict?

Negotiation

The idea of 'consultation' has often driven and framed the way museums and other heritage institutions approach and work with communities. Consultation is a concept that can sometimes imply simply 'telling' communities what you or your institution may intend to do. Replacing 'consultation' with the term 'negotiation' is a significant philosophical and practical shift in museum practice and policy. Rather than being a linguistic shift, it represents a substantial commitment to enter into a democratic relationship and active community engagement, which may involve museums ceding decision making on some issues. In short, it represents the idea that both curatorial staff and community groups are open to changing their opinions, ideas and practices, and contributing equally to these changes. Each party has the potential to bring substantial resources, ideas and insights into any project. Negotiation, like conflict, is an integral part of community consultation/engagement and requires equitable dialogue and debate. In moving to community engagement based on negotiation, rather than consultation, are you, your institution or your community group willing to:

- Be open to considering the ideas of others?
- Be open to reconsidering your position, or that of the institution/community you represent?
- Be prepared to be transparent about your agendas, aspirations and needs?
- Value, respect and recognise the contribution of each party?
- Challenge processes of exclusion?
- Enable shared ownership of the project between communities, professionals and institutions?
- Challenge previous institutional ideas and modes of practice?
- Are you willing to engage in conflict and debate?
- Provide the time, space and energy for lengthy, and what could be complex, debate?

Sustainability

Both the research undertaken by the 1807 Commemorated project, and the wider heritage literature on community issues, has identified the desire of community groups to maintain and sustain relationships with museums. Points to consider when discussing sustainability include:

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- How do you define sustainability? Is this definition shared by communities?
- Are you willing to discuss the scope and sustainability of the project with the communities involved?
- What do you and the communities hope to gain from a sustainable or long-term relationship/partnership?
- Have you discussed and negotiated what will happen at the end of the project/exhibition?
- Are you willing and able to meet post-project community expectations? Has this been negotiated with communities?

Outcomes and evaluation

Evaluating the process of community engagement is vital. It provides a means of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the relationships created through the programme of community engagement. It also provides a basis for developing future policy and practice. In evaluating the consultation process, things to consider include:

- What did you gain professionally and personally?
- What did the communities gain?
- What did the museum/institution gain?
- Is there a viable form for communities to feedback on a) the outcome of the project/exhibition, b) the community consultation/engagement process?
- Is there a methodology in place to assess the social impact of the project on wider communities and audiences?
- Is there a means for evaluating the experiences of staff members involved in the community consultation/engagement?
- How can you implement the range of insights gained from the evaluation?
- How are you planning to share these insights with colleagues and the community groups with which you have worked?

Further Reading

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