

1807 COMMEMORATED

LEARNING FROM THE BICENTENARY -
A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Practitioners Toolkit

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Introduction

Museum practitioners working with traumatic pasts and addressing legacies often engage with various issues which shape and inform their approach. Too often practitioner experiences can be overlooked as exhibitions and displays are created.

In dealing with issues regarding a traumatic past it is essential that these issues are considered within the context of exhibition and display development.

To aid practitioners and institutions in this objective the following toolkit has been compiled which addresses some of the significant issues identified by museum staff arising from the marking of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade.

This toolkit is based on 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](#). As part of the project, interviews with over a hundred heritage practitioners were conducted, which focused on their experiences in developing projects to mark the bicentenary.

This toolkit has been created on the principle that sharing experience within the heritage sector can assist in policy and planning. The toolkit is a guide for practitioners in the production and dissemination of a project.

This is not a prescriptive checklist of what to do but rather a series of thinking points to consider to aid practitioners and provide a means of reflection.

Toolkit aims

- The toolkit is a self-assessment tool for heritage practitioners assessing the experiences of individuals and their impact on the development of projects. It is for use by the museums, libraries and archives sector
- This toolkit aims to facilitate self-reflective and critical practice and to identify areas to improve understanding of how practitioners responded to the demands of representing a traumatic past
- This toolkit aims to provide a reflective exercise that identifies key issues to think about in terms of developing strategies to consider the roles of practitioners

This toolkit is based on

- The interviews carried out by the [1807 Commemorated](#) project with practitioners across Britain in connection to the marking of the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade
- The recognition that practitioner experiences are a significant part in the production of exhibitions, displays, related output or the formation of consultation panels
- The belief that the pressures and positives of practitioner experiences have been neglected within previous studies

- The recognition that heritage practitioners do face great difficulties in the development and production of museum, library or archive output
- The belief that identifying and addressing concerns held by heritage practitioners can benefit the process of constructing exhibitions/displays/consultation programmes
- The belief that the admission of difficulty by practitioners is not a signal of professional weakness, but a means of enriching the practice and policy of institutions.

Why use this toolkit?

There are a range of ethical and practical reasons for engaging fully with the experience of practitioners working on projects within the heritage sector:

- to help to understand how institutions and practitioners respond to complex working environments
- to develop transparent modes of work
- to facilitate a greater understanding within institutions of the pressures and concerns of heritage practitioners
- to assist in the development of consultation programmes
- to help facilitate the development of contentious and dissonant exhibition content

Issues discussed within the toolkit

This toolkit considers the issues of exhibition and display development with regard to 5 specific issues:

- Emotions and experiences: examining the experiences of heritage practitioners
- Using objects and texts: examining how practitioner use materials within exhibitions or displays
- Community consultation: considering the experience of practitioners with community groups
- Academic consultation: considering the experiences of practitioners with academic consultative groups
- Working relationships: addressing the significant relationships built by practitioners that effect and shape exhibitions or displays

The toolkit will be concluded with an evaluative section, where the issues that have been faced by heritage practitioners and wider institutions can be considered and used to inform future policy and practice across museums, archives, libraries and galleries.

Emotions and experiences

Working on the history and legacy of traumatic pasts can present a variety of challenging situations for heritage practitioners. Recognising the demands that are

faced by practitioners enables a far more nuanced and transparent understanding of the processes involved in developing exhibitions, displays, events or activities. Through their involvement in the representation of the past and the present, practitioners are exposed to the trauma of that history largely without assistance or institutional support. In the context of the marking of the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade, such was the degree to which some practitioners felt isolated and emotionally drained that some expressed doubt at their ability to engage in these processes again:

‘From a personal and professional point of view I don't think I could ever go through this again because of the emotions’ Curator Interview, 1807
Commemorated Archive

What was a significant issue for many practitioners was the troubling and disturbing history that they would encounter in researching and developing exhibition content. Using materials, images and text regarding the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade were deeply upsetting for some practitioners:

‘I was in the odd situation of having to look at three different sets of shackles and choose and it was the most horrible choice I've ever made...’
Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

We contend that the recognition of these emotional aspects of the role of the heritage practitioner is a significant addition to understanding the ways in which the past is represented. Ames (1992) suggests that a reluctance to acknowledge practitioner experiences stems from the presumed model of the curatorial role as objective and neutral; ‘the scholarly model of extensive research, careful accumulation and assessment of evidence over time, a focus on objects rather than issues, and political neutrality’ (Ames 1992: 7). The museum practitioner is always influenced by their own emotions, feelings, perceptions and subjective opinions. Issues to consider in these contexts are:

- Are there forums for practitioners to discuss the difficult aspects of their work regarding the production and dissemination of the past?
- Are the difficulties that can be faced by practitioners communicated to consultative groups and recognised within the wider institution?
- Are there strategies in place to incorporate the experiences of researching and disseminating histories and legacies of a traumatic past within the exhibition/display/consultation programme?

Using objects and texts

Working with traumatic histories often requires practitioners to rethink ways of developing content for exhibitions and displays. Responding to histories and legacies that possess implications for issues of paramount concern to contemporary society, such as racism, equality and human rights, ensures practitioners engage in a reflective assessment of their own work. The 1807-2007 bicentenary marked a particular challenge for institutions. Museum practitioners sought to represent the history of enslavement and abolition through a variety of ways, but a substantial shift in practice

saw the development of a larger reliance on text and narrative rather than objects. To many curators this shift in practice came as a surprise and a challenge to previous ways of working.

‘It was quite unusual...I found it very strange that as a curator that...we wanted to use the collections because that's our strength...this is the first exhibition that I've put on that the narrative almost drives the museum's displays with the objects almost supporting’. Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

The reasons for this turn away from objects are instructive to practitioners involved in representing traumatic pasts. In essence the main reasons for reconsidering the use of objects within the museum were; the perceived absence of objects through which the history could be communicated and the sensitivities inherent in displaying objects of brutalisation and repression.

Using the exhibition narrative as an ‘interactive’, or using the narrative structure to frame the exhibition experience for the visitor, inspired some practitioners to work towards building representations which asked visitors to examine their notions of history and society. Issues of human rights, racism and equality were especially prominent in this respect. Using text and narrative as the central feature of exhibitions in many circumstances therefore provided practitioners with a means of addressing wider social issues.

A close assessment of the ways in which objects and texts shape and inform an exhibition or display provides a means of reflection, both on the messages of that exhibition or display and the motivations of the practitioners who produced it:

- Are objects or issues the most important aspect of the exhibition, display or related output?
- What is the role of objects and texts within the exhibition or display? How do you want them to function?
- What are the ways objects can be used to do more than just ‘illustrate’ the past?
- What are the sensitivities surrounding the display of certain objects?
- What are the ways narratives can be used to convey contentious and dissonant exhibition content?
- How is the balance of objects and texts communicated to stakeholder groups and the wider institution?

Community consultation

A significant aspect of museum output for 2007 was concerned with community consultation, with a large number of museums engaging, some for the first time, into processes of consultation with local community representatives. The experiences of undergoing these consultations varied across museums, whilst many highlighted the positive relationships which were formed through meetings, some museum practitioners revealed the strains they felt placed under. As consultation programmes becomes an increasingly frequent aspect of museum practice the ways in which practitioners experience these processes must be explored.

In the context of 2007, whilst experience was diverse, for many practitioners the inclusion of consultation as a basis on which to develop exhibitions and displays was loaded with problems both practical and political.

‘I think you have to be realistic, as well, to what the community consultation is going to deliver’. Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

‘I kind of resent that question, because people always ask it, nobody does that with the white community, and I feel like there's this sense that somehow, oh if you're doing something for the Chinese audience, then you know, well, who is the Chinese community?’ Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

Engaging in forms of consultation in this way also revealed to some practitioners the highly significant nature of their work – politically, socially and indeed emotionally. It was at consultation events that many practitioners witnessed for the first time the anger, distrust and concern that many felt towards the movement to mark the bicentenary. Due in a large part to this ‘exposure’ to the issues, the advantages of carrying out the process of consultation were regarded by many museum practitioners as highly beneficial to the way they worked as individuals and the museum as a whole. Examining the role of community consultation within institutions provides a means of evaluating the extent to which consultation exercises can inform policy and practice:

- What do you hope to achieve through community consultation?
- How do you define the community with which you work?
- How do you balance minority and majority community voices?
- What training is available for practitioners engaged in consultation with community groups?
- At what point do you seek community consultation?
- How much time and resources can you allocate to community consultation?
- Where do you set up consultation exercises when considering the significance of power and place?
- How do you agree with community representatives the role, expectations and responsibilities of all parties?
- What structures do you have in place to cope with disagreement and changes in the community representative / institution relationship?
- What forums do you have in place for both practitioners and community representative to express fears or dissatisfaction with the consultative process?
- How much authority and decision-making power will you enable the community consultation groups to possess? How do you communicate this to groups?
- Is it important for you and your institution to have the final word in the decisions taken with community representatives?
- How do you envisage your relationship with the consultative group?

Academic consultation

A prominent feature of museum practice in 2007 was the utilisation of information and experience from a range of academics and commentators within exhibitions and events programmes. Examining the responses of museum practitioners to these relationships, how they worked, the positives and the difficulties faced, enables a greater understanding of the relationships that are built between practitioners and academic advisors. Drawing upon experiences of practitioners in 2007 provides a means of reflection and an ability to build on the significant work that was undertaken to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade.

The relationship in 2007 between museum practitioners and academics however was complicated by the lack of apprehension between the two sectors as to the requirements and demands of each. Many practitioners found that academic consultants were largely unaware of the limitations of what could or could not be achieved within the exhibition space.

‘What made me fascinated because I’ve always personally thought, you’re so knowledgeable...there’s so much still unknown about abolition and slavery...they all disagreed all the time...’ Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

‘Our advisory board was mainly academics...I think probably at the end of the day if I was ever doing this again I would try and introduce more people with hands-on experience of putting on an exhibition’. Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

The experience of museum practitioners working with academic consultants has been highlighted as both positive and beneficial to exhibition development. Nevertheless, problems arise in the unfamiliarity of external advisors with the modes of practice used by museums. Issues to consider therefore are:

- What do you hope to achieve through academic consultation?
- How do you obtain the advice from academics? What connections do you use and are there others?
- How do you negotiate between competing opinions expressed by academics?
- What training or induction procedures are there for academic consultants to familiarise them with museum policy and procedure?
- At what point do you seek academic consultation?
- How do you collectively agree the roles and responsibilities with academic consultants?
- What forums do you have in place for both practitioners and academic consultants to express fears or dissatisfaction with the consultative process?
- How much authority and decision-making power do you allow the academic panel to possess?
- How do you coordinate or unite the advice from the academic consultants and the community consultants?
- How is the information from academic consultants utilised within the delivery of exhibitions/displays/events/activities?

Working relationships

Interviewing a wide range of museum practitioners with regard to their work for the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade highlighted many similarities and differences in approaches and aims across the heritage sector. One of the most intriguing, with regard to the work carried out in 2007, was the manner in which practitioners felt pressure from a variety of sources to deliver their output for 2007. These pressures emerged from both internal and external groups and impacted upon the way practitioners worked, thereby shaping to some extent the development of exhibitions, displays and related output. Drawing upon these experiences and perspectives enables a greater degree of consideration towards the stresses and benefits of these relationships in the preparation of exhibitions and displays.

Museum professionals repeatedly remarked upon the difficulties they faced with working arrangements, especially the physically exhausting nature of their role:

‘Tiring...I spent the first 7 months on the post exhausted...so yes very tiring, there's lots of deadlines so you sort of like go from one deadline to the next and so you're in a perpetual state of stress...’ Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

These new working patterns within the museum and outside the museum could also bring great benefit and support to practitioners. Perhaps one of the strongest relationships described by practitioners that guided and reinforced the development of projects was the connections with external and internal design teams:

‘I think one of the things I'm most pleased about in terms of how the designers operated.’ Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

Despite the reassurance and support offered by design teams there were a few occasions described by practitioners where the influence of designers caused problems within institutions. Indeed, a number of museum practitioners were left frustrated by the arrival of design teams and their contribution to the project at a midway point in the development.

‘I think if you want to do your project with this kind of process the designers need to be on board as well because you can have this sort of conversations but if then the designers come and say we can't do (it) like that...’ Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

Alongside the significant role of designers, within the development of projects, the other major relationship stated by museum practitioners was the role of funding bodies, especially the Heritage Lottery Fund. Obtaining funds for producing exhibitions and meeting the criteria agreed by the Heritage Lottery Fund were paramount concerns:

‘I've worked on HLF (bids) on another context but never gone through the funding process! Which is just actually, it's just, it's insane!’ Curator Interview, 1807 Commemorated Archive

Highlighting these relationships provides a valuable resource for examining both present and future work conducted within the heritage sector. It enables a broader perspective on the roles of individuals and organisations within the development of exhibitions, displays or events programmes:

- What are the significant relationships for heritage practitioners in the production of exhibitions/displays/events/activities?
- What processes are set in place to enable practitioners to express problems with timescales and production structures?
- What is the level of involvement of designers within the exhibition or display?
- At what stage are the designers brought onboard with the project?
- At what stage are the consultants, designers, academics brought together?
- How is the relationship with funding bodies managed?
- How are the stakeholders represented to the funding bodies? Do they form part of the application process?
- How can the demands of maintaining relationships, the time and resources concerned, be built into project designs?

Evaluation

- What evaluation methods are in place to measure practitioner experiences?
- In what ways can the production processes of exhibitions/consultation programmes be designed so that practitioner experiences can be utilised to develop and rework the production process as necessary
- How are you planning to share these insights with colleagues within the wider heritage sector and the community groups with which you have worked?

References

Ames, M. 1992 *Cannibal tours and glass boxes*. Vancouver: UBC Press.