

1807 COMMEMORATED

LEARNING FROM THE BICENTENARY -
A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Audiences Toolkit

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Introduction

This toolkit is based on the work of the [1807 Commemorated Project](#) 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 1498 structured interviews with visitors to eight exhibitions/museums portraying the history of British enslavement of Africans. These exhibitions included both permanent and temporary exhibitions that were developed to either mark, or opened during, the 2007 bicentenary of Britain's Abolition of its slave trade.

A description of the methodology used to conduct and analyse these interviews can be found on the [1807 Commemorated web page](#), alongside a detailed outline of the findings of these interviews. This toolkit draws on these findings.

This toolkit has been developed to help guide practice, and to identify discussion topics, regarding audience reception. This toolkit is to be used prior to, and during, the development of exhibitions and other projects involving representation and interpretation.

This toolkit should *not* be regarded as a prescriptive checklist of what to do, but rather presents points and issues to consider. Further issues particular to specific topics are likely to arise or emerge beyond those listed here.

The toolkit is ultimately based on an understanding that audiences will bring their own assumptions and preconceptions of a topic to any exhibition. These perceptions will not always coincide with the messages that were intended by museum curators or heritage interpreters. Research has also revealed that audiences do not only see exhibitions as educational resources, but are involved in more complex and diverse social and cultural practices and performances while visiting (see further reading for discussion of these points).

Toolkit aims

The toolkit aims to:

- Assist in examining audiences' responses for use by museums, libraries and archives.
- Facilitate self-reflective and critical practice within institutions and to identify strategies and techniques that could improve institutional understanding of visitors' responses to exhibitions.
- Provide a self-assessment document that identifies key issues to think about in terms of developing audience engagement strategies.

This toolkit is based on

- The [1807 Commemorated](#) study of audience responses to exhibitions, which critically explored the history of the British slave trade and British enslavement of Africans. It should be noted that these exhibitions attempted to challenge the dominance of historical narratives focusing solely on British abolition.
- The recognition that audiences construct their own meanings at exhibitions, and that these may not coincide with intended curatorial messages or exhibition content.
- That museum visiting is not a passive process, but an active performance of identity, meaning making, remembering and of learning and reflection.
- The belief that museums should be informed and empowered by understanding how visitors respond to exhibition content.
- A desire to develop exhibitions that actively challenge dominant myths, preconceptions and exclusionary historical and cultural narratives.
- The belief that understanding visitor responses to contentious exhibitions facilitates the impact that such exhibitions have on social justice issues and issues of equitable representation.

Why use this toolkit

There is a range of ethical and practical issues for engaging with audiences. Considering audience responses to existing or intended exhibitions can:

- Help to understand how people negotiate and mediate their traumatic past.
- Comprehend the modes of engagement at heritage/museum sites.
- Help to promote equality of opportunity and social justice.
- Address social exclusion.
- Facilitate audience development.
- Meet the requirements of government and funding bodies.
- Facilitate the development of contentious and dissonant exhibition content.

Why undertake audience surveys?

Surveys can be a tool in developing exhibition content, and not simply an evaluation tool at the end of the exhibition. Surveys undertaken prior to exhibition development can provide useful information about how certain topics are understood, and how challenges to received ideas about history may be either positively or negatively received. They can also be a powerful means of comprehending the cultural and emotional baggage that visitors may possess in relation to a particular historical or cultural topic. Through surveys information can be provided to help understand how meanings constructed by visitors are used to maintain or challenge individual and collective memories and identities. We contend that it is important to understand these issues in developing or re-working existing exhibitions, particularly those addressing dissonant and contentious topics that aim to reveal hidden histories or challenge dominant cultural or historical narratives. This information may provide guidance in developing interpretive strategies that a) work *with* or prioritise the strategies

members of audiences use to engage with particular topics, and/or b) explicitly attempt to circumvent those strategies that individuals and audiences use to disengage with topics. Points to consider when thinking about doing a survey include:

- What do you want to know and why?
- Is the survey for marketing purposes or for developing an understanding of the way visitors use and comprehend exhibitions? If it is for the former, quantitative methodologies may be appropriate, if it is for the latter qualitative methodologies may be more appropriate.
- How might surveys help you to develop exhibition content that challenges and reveals?
- Who will benefit from this survey?
- Ethical issues:
 - o Anonymity of those interviewed must be maintained.
 - o Particularly when dealing with painful topics, it is important that those people being interviewed/surveyed know that they can stop the interview at any point.
 - o Respect for those being interviewed is maintained.
 - o Information is provided to those surveyed about the topic of research, and how the information being gathered will be used (for instance, the 1807 Commemorated project handed out an information sheet at the end of the interview, which included the project's web address).

Exhibition message

Museums are increasingly taking a position on social inclusion and issues of equality, social justice, and race inequality. To achieve this, an understanding on how audiences use museums and relate to exhibition content is vital. The 1807 Commemorated audience findings shows that visitors will construct their own meanings beyond, or in opposition to, those intended by exhibition curators. One of the significant issues to emerge from this data is the question of how to break through, and work with, pre-existing cultural meanings to achieve these agendas. When considering exhibition messages and content it may be useful to consider:

- What are the dominant narratives or understandings of a particular topic?
- What do these understandings *do*? That is, how do they shape, frame, explain or justify issues of inequality and social justice or injustice?
- What assumptions, or prejudices, shape or support comfortable and comforting dominant narratives?
- What emotional responses do dominant narratives or assumptions evoke? What emotional commitment do people have to dominant narratives; how significant are they to them?
- What resistance is likely to exist to challenging these dominant narratives?
- What can you hope to achieve with the museum's intended message?
- Who is your target audience for this message?
- Do you have different messages for different audiences? If so, how do they interrelate, are there contradictions within or between them?

Contexts

The political, social and cultural contexts at both local and national levels, and in some cases internationally, will need to be considered when assessing likely audience responses. This is because audience responses will draw on wider frames of reference and narratives to help them make sense of exhibition content and to mediate the meanings and messages they draw from it. This may facilitate message uptake if the messages do not challenge this context, but those that challenge that context may find that there will be resistance. Points to consider include:

- What is the current social, political and economic climate in which the exhibition is taking place?
- What are the social and political issues, at a local or at a national level, that relate to this exhibition?
- What are the self-referential or self-sufficient arguments or narratives that people draw on to maintain particular positions?
- What are the emotional responses engendered by particular narratives?
- To what extent does general knowledge exist on this topic? What are the main educational narratives found in the school curriculum?
- What are the boundaries and extent of public debate about these issues?
 - o How is this issue talked about in the following areas: radio, tabloids, broadsheets, internet blogs, chat rooms, etc.?
 - o What other sources do people use to draw on and to get information about this topic?
 - o How are people engaging or disengaging from the wider topic in these forums?
- In what way can any resistance to challenging narratives identified in these forums or surveys you may have done (such as self-sufficient arguments, myths, prejudices, etc.) be incorporated as an explicit strategy within the exhibition?
- In what ways can the tactics and strategies that people use in engagement with difficult topics that you have witnessed in the above forums or surveys be incorporated?
- How explicit are you willing to be to challenge and confront existing narratives?

Target and Traditional audiences

Engaging with a dissonant or a forgotten past requires close consultation and negotiation with those communities who associate or may be associated with that history ([see toolkit on community consultation](#)). It also requires institutions to take steps in implementing outreach policies. However, it is also important to recognise that the museums cannot be all things to all people. While museums and other heritage institutions are obliged to engage with marginalised and forgotten histories, and the communities associated with them, this may be difficult and challenging for established audiences to accept. It is important to note that social inclusion is not about assimilating the excluded into dominant ways of seeing history and heritage, but rather accepting and respecting the diversity of historical and contemporary experiences. It is, in many ways, inevitable that as new ways of seeing heritage and

the past are pursued in museums, those audiences comfortable with previous narratives and exhibitions will be confronted. It is worth considering how those audiences might also be engaged through an active challenging of their preconceptions. Indeed, we suggest that engaging and challenging established audiences is as important an issue to address as is meeting the needs of target audiences. Points to think about in considering *target audiences* include:

- How and why have you defined a target audience?
- In what ways does this target audience differ from traditional museum audiences? (This difference should be measured not only in terms of demographics but also in terms of social and political experiences, memories, aspirations, etc.)
- What are the aspirations of these target audiences for social justice?
- What are the pre-existing contexts of that target audience towards the exhibition topic?

Points to think about in considering *traditional audiences* include:

- How well do you know your traditional audiences?
- What previous responses have there been to existing exhibitions – both contentious and non-contentious?
- What do these responses tell you about your audiences and the narratives and assumptions that they hold?
- What are the aspirations of these audiences?
- What is the extent of knowledge generally held by these audiences of the topic to be developed for exhibition?
- What is the emotional investment of these audiences in existing cultural narratives on the topic in question?
- What is the investment of these audiences with the institution itself?
- What are the social justice and policy outcomes of challenging the received cultural narratives held by this audience?
- Do the aspirations, knowledge, narratives and social justice agendas of your traditional audiences clash with those of your target audience?
- If it does, to what extent are you willing to mediate this conflict in both the [consultation process](#) and/or in the exhibition content?

Educational aims

British and international research suggests that visitors may not necessarily visit museums for education or education alone. Visitors often come to *reaffirm what they already know*; this was a significant finding of the [1807 Commemorated](#) project. In dealing with hidden or contested histories, or with dissonant heritage, it may be important to challenge received knowledge on a topic. Understanding the processes of disengagement is important, but so too may be challenging or questioning the validity of the emotional underpinnings and baggage of that received history. Education is not simply about providing information, it is also about providing experiences that may engender an array of complex emotional responses. Points to consider include:

- How do you define education in museums?
- How do you measure the educational success of an exhibition? Is it in terms of increased knowledge, or increased sensitivity to the issue by individual visitors?
- What strategies are in place for monitoring the success of the approaches used for defining and implementing educational aims?

Imaginative/emotional aims

It is evident from the results of the [1807 Commemorated](#) research that visitors are searching for emotional guidance on how to respond to, and mediate, the histories and legacies of traumatic pasts, and the consequences that these have for contemporary senses of cultural identity. Providing for ways to mediate emotional responses is a key issue in developing exhibitions that deal with traumatic histories. Points to consider include:

- What are the emotional consequences of dominant narratives? How do they underpin and feed into collective memory, national and local community identity?
- What emotional triggers, if any, do you want to try to challenge or engage in your exhibition? How will these achieve the aims and/or facilitate the messages of the exhibition?
- What strategies are available to facilitate the negotiation of emotional responses?
- What strategies are available for visitors to express their emotional responses? (Note: message boards/comments books are not necessarily sufficient, and it may be useful to use these in combination with other strategies. Further strategies to think about are the use of floor staff as facilitators, or discussants, use of video or audio feedback boxes, etc.)
- What do you hope to achieve by engaging audience emotions? How does it relate to the messages and aims of the exhibition?
- What actions have you in place to monitor the effectiveness of the strategies in place to help visitors to negotiate their emotional responses?
- Anger is a likely response to contentious exhibitions for a range of reasons. This should not be feared, rather strategies need to be employed that aim to help mediate this emotional response, and give it constructive expression.

Active, positive engagement

From the [1807 Commemorated](#) research, active, positive engagement with dissonant exhibitions often occurred when people were able to draw links from their own past or family histories. To some extent engagement occurred through the generation of empathy (although it needs to be noted that this can also be a disengaging strategy). Active engagement also tended to occur when audiences were able to make personal links through such things as ethnic affiliation, feelings of compassion linked to their own personal experience, or when the exhibition affirmed identity and individual and collective memory. From the research, we observed that the following were often central to positive engagements from a range of audience groups:

- Use of personal stories or individual stories and histories.
- The development or illustration of local connections.
- Inclusion of interpretive panels that interrogated people's opinions and feelings.
- Active and explicit affirmation of the legitimacy of dissonant histories.
- Acknowledging the processes by which histories and memories had been hidden/forgotten.
- Acknowledging and explaining the contemporary legacies of the topic. Explicit linkages to contemporary events, news items or occurrences were important, and used by some visitors to help develop their understanding.
- Providing an emotional vocabulary through which challenged audiences could negotiate and understand their responses.

Disengagement

When analysing the 1807 data, we found that an array of strategies were employed by visitors to distance themselves from negative emotions and challenges to comforting histories, that underpinned collective and individual identities. These included:

- Denial of personal linkages to that history.
- Denial of ethnic linkages to that history.
- Deferring of historical or collective responsibility for the consequences of that history to contemporary society.
- Use of self-sufficient arguments, this included:
 - o Geographical distancing (other countries were involved/started the trade, it was not just Britain, it did not happen on British territories etc).
 - o Temporal distancing (it happened too long ago).
 - o Moral distancing (it was the morals of the times).
 - o Class distancing (elite classes are responsible/benefited).
 - o Attributing blame and guilt to secondary parties (Africans were party to it, etc).

Examples of these self-sufficient arguments used by visitors to exhibitions on African enslavement can be found on the [1807 Commemorated](#) website.

Critical appraisal by audiences

Audiences often see exhibitions as reflecting the status of public debate on a particular issue. Audiences, particularly target audiences, will judge the extent to which museums have adequately represented public debate, and/or the extent to which museums have attempted to address a range of social justice issues. As locales of public knowledge, museums also operate as forums to express dissonant and competing narratives. To facilitate this process it may be useful to:

- Consider ways in which different audiences may engage in ongoing debate and discussion both with each other, and/or with the content of the exhibition.

- Recognise the legitimacy and importance of the critical appraisal of target audiences.
- Consider the provision of space or opportunities for audiences to express their critical reflections on the exhibition. Note that traditional notice boards/comment books may be insufficient in establishing dialogue and debate.

Evaluation

Some points to consider when evaluating a project include:

- What evaluation methods are in place to measure audience responses?
- In what ways can exhibitions be designed so that audience feedback, and the occurrence of unpredicted audience disengagement strategies, can be utilised to develop and rework the exhibition, as or when 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?

Further Reading

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