

Review Article

Challenging History: reviewing debate within the heritage sector on the 'challenge' of history

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History museums have a responsibility to bear witness to the past, however difficult that past may be (Kavanagh in Sandell, 2002: 116)

In 2009, the *Challenging History* seminar series was held at Historic Royal Palaces, the Tower of London. The seminars were funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Museums Libraries and Archives Council and arose out of a number of conversations between staff at City University, the Tower of London and the MLA. Attended by museum professionals and academics from a range of contexts, the programme was conceived to explore the role, aims and outcomes of heritage and museum learning programmes in relation to difficult and controversial subjects; an ongoing concern across the sector. Although the interpretation of such heritages is not a historically new venture for museums there are increasing opportunities for and expectations of work in these areas, and a demonstrable anxiety amongst professionals about how such programmes might be conceived and enacted. In response to this anxiety, *Challenging History* offered opportunities for dialogue and exchange, both across the museum profession (for example, what might be learnt from Holocaust education and approaches that could inform learning programmes about slavery and the slave trade?), but with academia also, where there has been an increasingly nuanced and comprehensive debate about heritage and its innate difficulty.¹

In total, 27 individuals self-selected onto the programme, a range of museum professionals at various stages in their careers (mostly from education departments) and academics; all with their own particular understandings of the 'challenge' of history. This number included people from the Tower of London, City University, the MLA, the Imperial War Museum, University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies, the National Army Museum, the Historical Association, the 1807 Commemorated Project, the Horniman Museum, the Understanding Slavery Initiative and the Royal Naval Museum. The sessions were facilitated by an Engagement Advisor from the MLA, with help from Sparknow,² and comprised a mix of open discussion, group work and workshop based activities, sometimes involving site-specific work at the Tower. All participants attended four half-day seminars organised around different themes and objectives.

In the opening *Challenging History* seminar, all participants were asked to note their motivations for attendance, giving the organisers an insight into their existing anxieties and perceptions. It emerged that participants felt limited and inhibited in their engagement with challenging histories for a number of reasons: practical reasons such as a lack of specific skills and training and a scarcity of time in their day to day work to think about ethical issues; a lack of communication across the sector and with academia on these themes making them feel isolated; and a hesitancy to be seen to claim ownership or authority over heritages that might be deemed inappropriate.

Compiled from resources including audio recordings, observations, display materials and documentation of exercises,³ this review briefly reflects on some of the issues raised in the series. I do not wish to 'imprison' the debate fostered during the seminars in text, but seek instead to highlight tensions emerging around the nature of academic and professional debate, project management and instrumentalism, and understandings of ethics and responsibility. It will be seen that perceptions of 'museum culture' more broadly emerge as the biggest problematic for these museum professionals; that such a culture leads to institutional inertia and feelings of disempowerment, and that as a result education staff are reluctant to change their practice or challenge the norms of their institutions. There is a divide

between the nature of academic debate and the reality of day to day operations within heritage institutions. This is a divide which could grow in coming years as heritage institutions are forced to make savings and re-prioritise.

It became clear that accepting the responsibility of 'bearing witness' (to use Kavanagh's phrase above) was a most pertinent factor in successful museum work in this area. However, for the heritage professionals present at the seminars, this role of 'witness' involves daily embodiment and navigation of a complex, if not troubling, internal duality. In such moments there are tensions around the simultaneity of their individual identity (with all of the accompanying complexities, attachments and entry narratives) and their professional and institutional identity (with its own sets of agendas, sense of mission, policy and practice). Such a double witnessing can at times reveal synergy, but can also result in moments of dissonance, discomfort, even embarrassment.

The group spoke at some length about the varied expectations that visitors come to museums and other heritage encounters with, and there was some concern that these were more abstruse in programmes dealing with difficult and sensitive histories. This sense of the unknown (and unknowable) extended to how far they felt audiences were ready for heritage practice that was more reflexive, challenging, and unpredictable. It was mooted by some that the 'typical' museum audience might not be able to perceive benefit in such programmes, as in the quotation above. This is counter to evidence produced in Fiona Cameron's research which shows that many museum visitors are open to reflection on such topics and feel it is a museum's duty to engage with them (Cameron, 2003; 2006). However, the sense of a typical closed-minded visitor was very much alive amongst these museum professionals, and proved a frustration given the wider concern of the sector with widening and diversifying audiences. As such, the heritage professionals readily fell into a practised critique of their own faithful but unchanging visitors, as fairly traditional in their outlook and unadventurous in their consumption of 'other' heritages.

This caricature was, however, enthusiastically exploded when it came to thinking about programmes marked 'challenging' or that sit outside of the mainstream of museum interpretation. Challenging history work is thus often characterised as existing outside of the core museum offer, working with non-traditional audiences, and using 'different' approaches.

In such work though, another tension emerges. Non-traditional audiences are perceived as open to difficult topics, but are themselves perhaps rather *too* challenging in their heterogeneity, and in their 'closeness' to the heritage. Rightly or wrongly, it was conceivable to these education staff that certain communities of interest would necessarily feel more invested in and passionate about topics than they ever could or should. Debate about ownership and appropriation emerged as a central problematic: who has the '*right*' to '*deal with*' a subject matter, and to whom might museum staff need to go in order to legitimise the work or '*ask permission*' to do it?⁴ In this sense, it seems true that, as Ruth Abram (one of the founders of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience) has noted, 'There is, in the museum profession, a certain fear of the public' (Abram in Sandell, 2002: 133). In this instance, that fear is rooted in questions about authority, legitimacy and perhaps even guilt, which are amplified through a perception of isolation from the 'core' practice and function of the institution.

This brought the group to something of an impasse, and a debate about individual entry narratives of experience, grief, trauma, inheritance, and intolerance; we can never predict how these might be revealed, enacted, hidden, or indeed obscured in the moment of engagement (or indeed alienation), but anticipation of them is palpable. This '*personal resonance*' is key, but it is of course intensely unpredictable. Such a tension is difficult to reconcile given the personal and professional agendas we all navigate (here we see the dual process of witnessing being sensitively and precisely articulated):

How do you secure audiences? That is a reference to two things; how do you make audiences feel safe, hold them and allow them to explore these issues, but also how do you engage them and keep them coming back and thinking about these issues?

One frequent response to this challenge was to seek to share the burden of responsibility with the audiences themselves, that is, to engage them in processes of collaboration, participation and co-production, in the very patterns and practices of their representation. This is a common response to the 'problem' of representation. Consultation and collaboration, which can of course be challenging in and of themselves, were highlighted as means of ensuring that multiple narratives and viewpoints are more honestly built into the structures of the institutions, their exhibitions and education programmes. Through such practice, the public's active role in the processes of meaning making might be, and is being, both recognised and formalised into the practice of the institution. The increase in participatory practices framed on a premise of collaboration, co-production and even 'democracy' attests to this (at least in the rhetoric).⁵

However, the conversation quickly turned to the practical limitations of trying to engage in such reflexive and open-ended endeavours within institutions used to traditional working practices and ascribing legitimacy: *'We are lucky if we are in an institution that listens'*. Both frustration and insecurity were evident in equal measure in these moments. The group spent a significant amount of time discussing institutional power structures (perceived and actual) that currently dictate certain forms of engagement through challenging history programmes. A museum's hierarchy and claims to authority were seen as problematising any bid to initiate more genuinely open dialogues and collaboration at this stage.

It was generally agreed however that there was space within educational programmes to engage more fully with particularly challenging subject matter. This is likely to be in large part because of the bounded nature of the session (it will cover a particular topic, in an allocated time slot, with a captured if not captive audience), its sequential and often linear structure, and its permissiveness of a certain type of enquiry, often with dialogue and participation a prerequisite. This group of museum professionals were thus open to working with difficult heritages, and to the idea of detailed collaborative projects, yet for practical and other reasons remain more comfortable working with groups that can be 'known' and in situations where experience can be in some way contained.

Working with such heritages within education programmes however, brought another set of anxieties to the fore; in projects that seek to engage with difficult and sensitive heritages, what does a successful learning programme achieve? What are the ethics of 'teaching'? For some participants in the seminars, tangible learning outcomes were a must (that is, ones measured by the museum and not by the individual). For others, it was enough for visitors to be given the opportunity to think and feel; just to 'be' within the space and place of the institution. Thinking about what can realistically be achieved in learning programmes emerged as crucial, as was the articulation of particular understandings of learning that might be appropriate for a project: factual, emotional, social, political, ethical, embodied, experiential, perspectival, or indeed any combination these.

The link between education and emotion was one that preoccupied a significant proportion of the seminar time, revealing insecurity about how and whether empathy and emotion should be framed as learning outcomes (and what their relationship to memory practices might be). Making space for silence, and time to transition between the relative safety of a challenging programme or exhibition and the 'real' world, emerged as hugely important, but how the various layers of a site, its spaces and its overarching narrative allow for that remains more ambiguous. Silence emerged as a necessary presence, a pivotal step in the learning process. But how it is framed, understood and encouraged within museum spaces remains in need of further exploration; not least in terms of how museums differentiate 'being silent' from 'being silenced'.

A number of issues were raised evidencing a frustration at the simplifying and authenticating practices of the museums represented by the group. Dealing appropriately and sensitively with the issues raised often seemed unmanageable and the institutional hurdles insurmountable: *'I have to write the most neutral caption I can to allay these fears'; 'It feels like we just stopped because it was too hard'*. This is not surprising given the institutional inertia identified by participants, and is a common problem for many institutions where 'curating contentious topics (if undertaken at all) results in an attempt to adhere to acceptable norms and tolerated limits' (Cameron, 2003: 24). Finding consensus (assuming

there can be any) whilst simultaneously pleasing stakeholders (including community groups) may be a challenge too far.

With justification of resources and personnel becoming intensely problematic across the cultural landscape, it is not likely that challenging histories work which happens outside of the mainstream will see increased investment any time soon, or that institutions will recognise value in reflexivity and risk-taking. Instead, as the final session came to a close, and individuals' thoughts turned to implementation of the dialogues and concerns back in the 'real' world of their institutions (perhaps even justifying their attendance at the seminars), discussion turned to the possibility of building a 'Toolkit' or 'Framework' which would make it easier to articulate, approach and assess work with challenging histories. This was a contentious issue for debate. There was a desire for the perceived clarity and utility that such a device would provide as a referent (even legitimacy), but at the same time an almost universal wariness. There was a sense to which building a framework was seen to divest the individual or institution of the responsibility for what happens in a programme. For those in the room at least, this was ethically problematic. As much as the museum sector, or the institutional framework, might regard a toolkit as attractive, it was resisted, and proposals which implicated the entirety of an institution (rather than just those in education departments) in the processes and practices of work in this area were encouraged.

Throughout the seminars, for all of the reasons identified in this review, there was an underpinning anxiety that weighed up the ethics of doing *something* against the ethics of doing *nothing*, and it was never clear which would win out.

Conclusions

A number of themes emerge from this review of the Challenging History debates. Firstly, that museum visitors and the visitor experience remain typecast, with challenging history work perceived as sitting outside of the mainstream. It is work that is peripheral, unpractised and, as such, is difficult to feel confident about. Secondly, for these museum educators, the learning outcomes that were easiest to acknowledge and most readily sought in programmes were precisely those that remain harder to express, and of course to measure, than other learning outcomes.⁶ Thirdly, there is a perception that engaging ethically with these histories with audiences is compromised by the very nature of the institutions, the limitations they impose, a lack of space and/or time, and a lack of dialogue about difficult and sensitive histories and their interpretation more broadly. Although the will is there, inertia is a more likely outcome in the face of such perceived obstacles.

The insecurities the discussions manifest and make visible stem largely from a conflation of individuals' roles within the everyday practice of the institutions. Working in project delivery, these individuals are tasked with being educators, sometime counsellors, facilitators, communicators, mediators and of course, all the while, gatekeepers to the material heritage as curated by the museum. This raises questions about what the jurisdiction of education staff should be, and the responsibility of other museum staff also to commit to the challenge of the heritage. Given this range of responsibilities, and the ethical and personal considerations inherent in trying to be all things simultaneously, it is perhaps no wonder that seminar participants felt overwhelmed by the gravity of work in this area. This feeling was compounded by a perceived lack in support and understanding from the wider museum, and the growing divide between academic and practitioner debate.

In these closing remarks, it is perhaps appropriate to ask whether this perception of 'the museum' bears scrutiny in 2011. In the workshops, museums emerged as intensely risk-averse, operating with little hope or regard for sustainability in education work (particularly problematic in programmes related to sensitive heritages), and slow to respond to the challenges of their diversifying audiences. This relies on a caricature, indeed perhaps a fetishisation, of the traditional museum and the 'acts of attention' it demands (Henning, 2006), perhaps reverting to a 'safe' understanding of the museum, latterly understood as a place of imbalance and asymmetry. Yet this perception, whether fitting or not, reveals opportunities also. It exposes the museum as (at its best) an unfinished, infinite and intimate project, and its education staff as intensely human. Whether the controversy is real or perceived, this opens

up avenues for debate, collaborative endeavour and crucially, mutual learning experiences between institutions and their visitors.

**Those interested in the themes raised in this review may like to find out more about the upcoming Challenging History Conference to be held at City University London in February 2012 (see www.city.ac.uk/cpm/challenginghistory)*

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Notes

- ¹ For more on how the group defined 'challenging history', and on the academic debate that informed this definition, please see Kidd, 2009
- ² Sparknow (see <http://www.sparknow.net>)
- ³ The author was engaged as session recorder for all of the Challenging History seminars. For full details of the project, please go to <http://www.city.ac.uk/cpm/challenginghistory> and see Kidd, 2009.
- ⁴ Direct quotes are anonymised but indicated with italics
- ⁵ See Lynch, 2011 for an overview and critique of this practice
- ⁶ This is of course open for debate.

References

- Abram, R. (2002) 'Harnessing the Power of History' in R. Sandell (ed), 2002, *Museums, Society, Inequality*. London: Routledge
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