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GEM Yorkshire and Humberside ReachOut Research Bursary

Reflective Research Report Summary

War and Peace: Researching how sensitive histories are approached in museum learning

Areas of Enquiry

How have the First World War Commemorations impacted on formal education sessions offered by museums in terms of content, practice and attitudes? What best practice models exist for teaching and learning about conflict and resolution exist nationally and internationally that museums can learn from?

How can this support and enhance museum teaching and learning about sensitive issues in relation to conflict and resolution, and the contemporary links to current society?

Overview of Research

- Many museums have created programmes for schools and families during the centenary of the First World War, meaning that there have been more opportunities for children to engage with these topics.
- However, this has opened up the debate about the teaching of sensitive issues.
- Our initial research showed that the link between sensitive histories and museum education practice was an under-researched area. Instead the bulk of the research focussed on classroom practice.
- We chose to focus on workshops delivered to children in Key Stage 2.

Why teach sensitive histories at all?

- It was clear from our research that teaching sensitive issues is something that teachers struggle with as they are unsure about where they should set the boundaries.
- Paul Bracey (2015) holds the view that teaching sensitive histories allows for richer learning opportunities.
- Museums face the problem of being seen as a family day out but at the same time should not 'shy away from the horrors of war' (Simon Stephens, 2013).

Sites Visited

We chose to visit sites that presented sensitive issues both in their collections and education sessions. The sites we visited were:

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- The Peace Museum
- Royal Armouries
- Imperial War Museum (North and London)
- Anne Frank House
- National Army Museum
- Leeds Museums and Galleries

Outcomes:

Topic of Age

- This was a key theme from both our research and site visits was age.
- Research suggests that there are more opportunities for learning about these topics at a younger age before ‘external specifications act as a barrier’ (Historical Association, 2007).
- Sites such as the Imperial War Museum North do not teach sensitive histories to children younger than Year 5 as they do not want to have to dilute the information given.
- Leeds Museums and Galleries have delivered their First World War programme to children in playgroup all the way through to adults. They achieve this by adapting the questions they use to prompt discussion.

Teaching Remembrance

- An approach that is more appropriate for teaching about the First World War is Remembrance.
- Many of the museums that we visited used this approach including Leeds Museums and Galleries, who have been proactive throughout the centenary in working with local schools.
- The Peace Museum and National Army Museum both achieve a balance by discussing not just the red poppy but also the white and purple poppies.

Teaching the Holocaust

- This topic in particular is one that teachers find daunting as Martin Winstone (2017) points out that it raises uncomfortable questions.
- A key way to approach this topic with KS2 is through the Kindertransport.
- This is an important topic to approach as it deals with issues around migration, refugees, diversity and persecution which are issues that are still relevant today (Darius Jackson, 2018).
- Jonathan Lear (2011) warns that photographs which only portray the atrocities and tell us nothing about the people should be avoided.
- The aim of any Holocaust education work done should be to ensure that the victims are not dehumanised and seen only in the context of the horrors committed against them.

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- The Anne Frank House are keen to not simplify the experience of Jews under the Nazi regime to simply bullying, but show how on such a mass scale the impact it can have. They do not offer sessions to KS2.

Approaches to use in museum learning:

Artefacts

- The Historical Association (2007) points out that artefacts are key resources to have when teaching about controversial topics.
- This is something that museums can offer to schools to help them consolidate learning that has taken place in the classroom.
- This is an approach that supports all learners.
- The use of artefacts was an integral part of many of the sites that we visited showing the importance of this approach.
- When artefacts are used at a particular site this provides the opportunity for them to be put into historical context. This was most prominent at the Anne Frank House.

Eyewitness testimonies and Personal Stories

- Eyewitness testimonies provide a unique and memorable learning experience, which is at the very core of the museum learning experience.
- This approach provides a unique and memorable experience and is an approach used by the Imperial War Museum with 'Meet the Veterans'.
- Personal stories provide rich learning opportunities for children whether they are re-enacted by museum educators or explored through objects.
- This is an approach used by both the Royal Armouries and The Peace Museum.

Using the local area

- The 2014 National Curriculum did put a constraint on teaching the First World war in KS2, however this can still be achieved through a local history study.
- Museums can play a role in supporting schools to discover more about the local area. This is something that Barnsley Museums have done.

Providing opportunities for additional learning

- The Anne Frank House provide an aftercare package for teachers to equip them with the tools needed to deal with diverse and complex responses to sensitive histories.
- Many sites have tours for teachers and parents to engage children with the collection, providing the adult with the confidence to the topics presented.

Conclusions

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- In terms of the Centenary it does seem that this has led to more sessions being developed for KS2 pupils and younger to engage them with the history of the war and its impact.
- Teachers have been inspired to approach the subject, and many museums have offered their expertise and support of their collections to engage with this history in a sensitive and reflective way, providing unique and memorable learning opportunities and the scope for independent enquiry.
- WWI has taught us that museum education can go beyond the clichés of teaching the trenches and what the war was like, to a more cross-curricular approach which especially at primary age, can provide teachers and pupils alike with the tools and resources to engage with sensitive topics and histories in meaningful and impactful ways.
- In terms of an extended legacy, beyond the commemoration, museums can use approaches utilized and developed to teach about WWI and apply them to other issues surrounding sensitive histories, including the Holocaust and issues of diversity and prejudice which are relevant to the modern world.

How this has influenced our practice?

- From our initial observations at The Peace Museum and the Royal Armouries, we were able to highlight areas where our workshops already provide a balanced narrative and areas where this balance has not been achieved.
- At The Peace Museum, to coincide with the opening of the temporary exhibition 'A Flawed Peace', The Peace Museum developed a workshop focussed around the Christmas Truce aimed at Key Stage Two. The workshop challenged pupil's ideas of what really happened during the Christmas Truce using first-hand accounts of soldiers to do this.
- Royal Armouries has developed a KS2 workshop on the Second World War where one of the personal stories chosen is that of a child of the Kindertransport. As part of the story there was a timeline of events leading up to the Kindertransport in 1938/39 which included Kristallnacht. Whilst the timeline did not provide too much information on this event, after visiting the Anne Frank House, it was decided that it would not be appropriate to mention this in a fleeting way without providing pupils anymore context, artefacts or time for independent enquiry and it was therefore taken out.
- Overall, a key way in which this project has influenced our practice is that it has strengthened our view that sensitive histories can be taught to any age group, if approached carefully.