

Building a Learning Legacy

Advice Notes: Informal learning and community engagement

These advice notes are based on presentations given by Gill Britten (Yale College, Wrexham), Gavin Evans (Carmarthen Museum) and Sue James (National Waterfront Museum) at BaLL 2 skills-sharing events in early 2009. They highlight the value to heritage organisations and communities of informal learning and explore some of the challenges and opportunities posed by engaging with often hard-to-reach audiences.

Introduction

Informal learning is defined by different people in different ways. For the purposes of these notes and as it is understood in many heritage organisations, informal learning is the learning that takes place in a heritage organisation, planned or otherwise, by non-school groups or those not in formal education. It is informal learning both in the sense of the groups who are learning but it can also be informal in the sense of the learning itself – perhaps it is unstructured or ad hoc. Increasingly heritage organisations are looking to enable this sort of informal learning to take place for everyone in the community.

Why is informal learning important?

First and foremost, everyone has a right to access learning and while formal learning settings might not give everyone that access, heritage organisations can often fill that gap. Moreover, museums, libraries, historic houses etc. provide a very different learning environment – one that stimulates all of the senses and can provide for a range of different learning styles. And for many potential learners, particularly older people, a more informal learning setting can be more accessible – thus creating the potential for life-long learning.

Informal learning in heritage settings is also about social inclusion. Learning in and through these venues can help to develop important social values and attitudes in individuals and community groups including: empowerment, ownership, involvement, citizenship, engagement. Individuals and groups within the community can begin to develop mutual understanding and a sense of identity.

More practically, for informal learners, heritage organisations provide the opportunity to develop new skills – practical, academic and personal. This sort of learning might provide specialist support and knowledge to a particular religious or ethnic group in the community, through its collection or the nature of its space. And on a very basic level, this sort of informal learning allows people to feel involved, appreciated and in the company of like-minded people.

For heritage organisations, greater community engagement is vital if they are to remain relevant in today's society and as part of that, to challenge traditional perceptions of "museums", "heritage" etc. The community engagement that is a necessary part of developing and supporting informal learning activity is also a way of developing supportive and sustainable partnerships with community groups and further embedding the organisation in the community. The sharing of experience, knowledge and expertise that is part of these

partnerships is vital in supporting the community and vital in constantly renewing the relevance of the heritage organisation.

What are “informal learners”?

- Local history groups
- Special interest groups
- Self-directed learners
- Community First groups
- Families
- Under-sevens
- Welsh-speakers/other non-English speakers
- Older people
- Younger people i.e. Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)
- Low income families
- Black, minority and ethnic groups
- Special needs – physical, cognitive and intellectual impairments

Hard to reach groups

The following of the above-mentioned list are often referred to as “hard to reach”:

- Older people
- Younger people i.e. Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)
- Low income families
- BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) groups
- Those with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)

There are a host of reasons why these groups are difficult to attract to heritage organisations. They include:

- Pre-conceptions and misconceptions about heritage and museums being old-fashioned, the preserve of certain groups in society, not relevant, too academic, not fun
- Difficulty in getting to the site – accessibility and mobility problems
- Language barriers
- No targeted marketing at these particular groups
- Not enough money to visit heritage organisations
- Imposing/un-welcoming building and internal environment

There are also a host of reasons why these groups might not engage meaningfully even inside the venue. One important reason is often poor literacy skills. Individuals with poor reading and writing skills can feel intimidated by places where there is often a great deal of text to read. Moreover, these individuals are often disengaged from education generally through a lack of confidence in their ability to learn, low self-esteem and pre-conceptions about what learning is like. Attracting these groups must start with making them feel comfortable in a heritage environment. Offering food and drink is a very effective way of beginning this process. The learning activities should also be suitable to their learning styles: oral – storytelling; visual – demonstration/observation. The relationships that are built up with these groups must be sustainable otherwise they reinforce the sense of alienation and disengagement when they finish.

Examples of informal learning activities

It is possible to work with informal learners in a range of different ways and through many different types of activities. Below is a selection:

- Backpacks available for self-directed learners, particularly children, to support their learning
- Public days
- Group activities
- Projects
- Celebrating international festivals – i.e. Diwali and Chinese New Year
- Reminiscence sessions (going out to care homes)
- Advisory groups (to help support and develop the work of the organisation)
- Working in partnership with charities and organisations supporting particular groups in the community
- Working in partnership with local authority specialist teams i.e. youth offending team

Sources of further information

- [Inspiring Learning for All](#)
- [Embracing Difference](#)
- [Museums & Community Learning](#)

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