

Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Our Museum: A five-year perspective from a critical friend



By Dr. Bernadette Lynch



Foreword

This publication is a record of observations made by Dr Bernadette Lynch, writer, researcher and author of the influential *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report for the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. That report helped instigate the creation of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's *Our Museum: Communities and Museums as Active Partners* programme.¹

The observations below were made in an end-of-conference speech to the *Our Museum* partner museums while attending the *Our Museum* peer review in Bristol on 17th and 18th June, 2014, upon the invitation of the member institutions of the *Our Museum* programme. The peer museums involved in the programme requested that Dr Lynch give her opinion on whether, in her view, progress had been made in terms of organisational change as a result of being involved in the *Our Museum* programme. Dr Lynch's observations also refer back to the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report, clarifying some key elements within it in relation to the *Our Museum* programme and its ongoing objectives.

“Study the past if you would define the future”

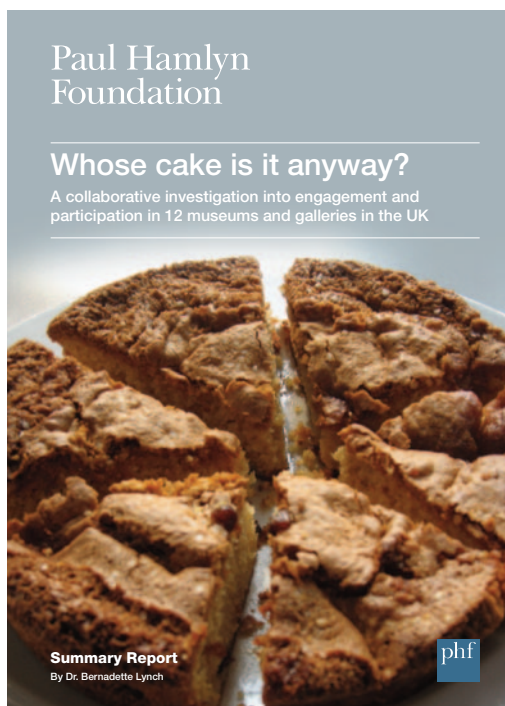
Confucius

¹ See the *Our Museum* programme: www.ourmuseum.org.uk

Introduction

It is almost five years since the report *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* was published by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF). It brought to the fore unspoken anxieties in museums, not only in the UK, but internationally as well, giving voice to doubts shared by funders, museum professionals and community partners about the effectiveness of years of investment in public engagement and participation in museums. The report is now required reading in museum studies programmes around the world.

The report contained the voices of people who simply hadn't been asked their opinion before. This was its greatest lesson and its greatest challenge – how do museums continue to hear those voices?



As the author of that report, and of the research upon which it was based, it was a great pleasure to be asked to come back to give my views to the participating museums on the progress of the PHF's subsequent *Our Museum* programme and its ambitious objectives for museums. It provided a chance for me to look back to *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?*² and forwards at the same time, to the evolving *Our Museum* programme and those processes of change for museums called for in the original report.

It was also a chance to be reminded of the findings of the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report in the light of what happened next. So what exactly has changed? Let's look back for a moment at the report. There were three big learning points:

1. Museums as organisations create their own obstacles to effective public engagement and participation
2. Reflective practice must become core to all of the museum's activities and relationships, and this practice cannot be done without community partners
3. And most importantly, that the museum is incapable of change without the views/voices/ input of its community partners as a central element of organisational development.

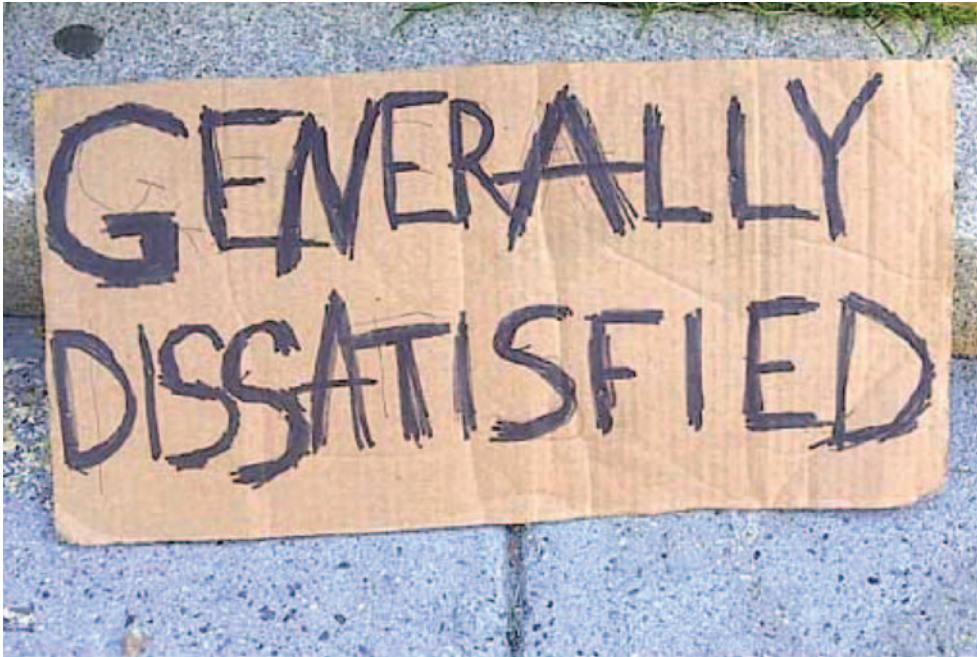
NOTE: Numbers 2 and 3 are inter-dependent. This means that reflective practice must centrally include dialogue with community partners.

The overarching point here is that museums are simply too entrenched in habits of mind to change themselves, no matter how much they talk about it to one another. It requires a degree of 'un-learning' to understand that community engagement and participation are not a question of 'inviting people in' to the museum's 'party' – it is rather about saying, "We can't do this without you – we need you! We need your critique in order to change". Then, and only then, might museums begin to develop a proper partnership relationship with community partners.

² The *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report is available online to download as a pdf from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation: www.phf.org.uk

Stuck

By the completion of the UK-wide study that informed the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report, it was clear that many felt ‘stuck’, and very few were happy with the status quo of ‘participation-lite’ in museums, whether they were museum staff members or community participants. The following sentiment sums up what the study overwhelmingly encountered.



The overall recommendation of the ‘*Whose Cake Is It Anyway?*’ report was that a sustained process of cultural change in museums was urgently needed, supported by the fostering of ‘critical friends’. These should be drawn from peers and community partners, willing to openly discuss, through a transparent, reflective practice, the changes necessary to support effective public participation. It would only be through these collaborations that the culture of museums, stifling to true collaboration, would start to change.

Why does it matter that museums change?

Recently, the ethicist and contemporary philosopher Peter Singer wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* that struck a nerve with many in the arts, and I suggest also has relevance for the heritage community. Singer compared the relative value of funding organisations [like PHF] giving to the arts and heritage with giving to charities that are actively working to cure blindness.³

He acerbically noted that “...it seems clear that there are objective reasons for thinking we may be able to do more good in one of these areas than in another”. Pursuing this argument, he suggested that those who are willing to fund the construction of a new wing of your museum, for instance, are, in essence, choosing to allow thousands to become blind by funding museums rather than charities that do some tangible good.

³ See “Museums ... So What?” by Rob Stein: <https://medium.com/code-words-technology-and-theory-in-the-museum/museums-so-what-7b4594e72283>

This is a provocative argument, but is he wrong? Here in the UK, the tangible and immediate needs of the failing National Health Service or, for that matter, the crises we hear about daily in global health and poverty, can easily claim moral precedence over what Singer maintains are the relatively frivolous, consumer and market-driven cultural endeavours of museums. His is certainly a provocative way to get museums to respond – to argue their social worth – something they have not yet, in my view, done convincingly. Yet, in these troubled times – economically, environmentally, socially – museums find themselves in a situation where they must – convincingly – make that argument loud and clear, and this is where *Our Museum* comes in.

For, if we believe that our museums do not in fact make a difference, then Peter Singer is right: they are simply not worth supporting. The *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report showed how museums too easily panicked and lost their way in an economic recession, falling back into a comfort zone that effectively excludes public participation, and embracing other models much closer to that of the shopping-centre, of little value to their communities. But, as Bob Janes reminds us, a failure to clearly understand their public mission in such troubled times will soon leave museums out in the cold:

In a world of pressing local and national issues, it is common sense to expect that public funding will eventually go to environmental, social and economic priorities. Those museums that remain committed to consumption, edutainment and ancillary education will no longer be sustainable in this context. Many are not sustainable now.⁴

In this regard, the *Our Museum* programme is not ‘just’ about participation and engagement – it aims also to address museum sustainability through public participation and social responsibility, and it is with good reason, in the UK at least, that it can be called ‘the only game in town’. The inspired experimental funding by PHF to invest in helping museums transform themselves, to make a significant and, most importantly, sustained, social difference, helps not only the museums, but the funding agencies themselves, to answer the question posed by Singer: ‘Museums...so what?’

Critical friend observations

Here are some observations gathered from thinking about the peer museum reports at the *Our Museum* conference in Bristol in June 2014, and from conversations at the conference with individual staff members of museums engaged in the *Our Museum* programme. The observations shared here do not cite the experiences, successes or difficulties of individual museums, but rather note some overarching themes that emerged from listening to and observing the museums in the programme.

First of all money, or lack of it: let’s talk about funding.

The *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report was published towards the end of the gravy years of DCMS Renaissance in the Regions funding for museums. Following decades of extra investment in this type of work (and therein lay the

⁴ Robert R. Janes (2010) *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* (Routledge).

irony), it became abundantly clear that it was precisely because of this extra investment in the public engagement work of the museum that museums were able to carry on business as usual, maintaining public engagement at the periphery of their work.

Thus, the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report clearly demonstrated this irony – that museums' use of this additional funding, designated for the purpose of public engagement, simply served instead to maintain a situation in which public engagement remained peripheral, with the core of the museum and its budget allocation remaining virtually unchanged. The funding was typically used for a variety of public participation posts, mostly filled by junior staff with limited influence to deliver change, but given all the responsibility for public engagement outside the museum, while the museum largely resisted making the changes that these posts were intended to facilitate. And when the funding stopped, the posts disappeared.

The question we have now, as we near the end of the PHF funding, is whether this situation has continued?

I ask this because I have heard a great deal of talk among the peer museums in the *Our Museum* programme about the inability to maintain this work without the help of additional PHF funding. But the *Our Museum* programme is about organisational change: it was never about project funding – in fact it was intended as a counter to the limitations of short-term funding. It was therefore disheartening to see some of the museums involved in *Our Museum* obviously continuing to use it that way, to replace lost Renaissance funding for short-term projects, as well as short-term public engagement posts.

It was clear that there have been significant shifts and interesting approaches among some of the museums involved in the *Our Museum* programme, in terms of starting to embed long-term cultural change in their museum, with the help of the *Our Museum* team. But, as mentioned above, I have elected not to single out museums in this report. Nonetheless, too many of the participating museums told me that the *Our Museum* programme 'couldn't have come at a worse time' – an economic recession. But instead of using the crisis-of-direction that the economic downturn brought about as an opportunity to radically re-affirm the museum's social commitment, and with *Our Museum* support, to find new and creative ways to embed this work across the museum and within local communities, these museums continue to be preoccupied with their fear of running out of PHF funding to support the work.

This is not intended to target for criticism individual museum staff members – such a situation plainly reflects a continued lack of understanding of the shifting role of the museum in society, and an even more fundamental lack of commitment to the museum's social role at senior management level within these museums. Many of these museums have already experienced major cuts in the area of their museum's public engagement work, their museum thus demonstrating the peripheral nature of management's commitment to public engagement.

It brings to mind that memorable moment in the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report, when a senior manager was given the task of describing the museum's present relationship with its local communities. She gathered her staff into a circle, presenting each with an empty water glass she took from a side table. The manager then took the full water jug and poured water

(resources) into each glass. There was very little left over. She then approached a group of empty chairs, which represented the public, who were not present. Having placed an empty glass on one of those chairs, she drained the very small amount of water that remained in her jug into this glass. This represented, she explained, the very little left over for 'the public'. The manager had clearly demonstrated that in order to get more water to give to the 'public', she would have to go back to one of the curators and take water from his or her glass. This was described by the manager as an unsolvable dilemma – simply not enough money to support community engagement programmes if the organisation was also to support its 'core' work. Thus the notion of 'core' excluded the museum's communities.

Are we similarly saying that museums now have little choice but to cut their public engagement activities, given the loss of funding support locally and nationally? We still seem to be referring to public engagement in publicly funded museums as though it were an option or a choice.

California dreamin'

At the *Our Museum* conference in Bristol, we all benefited from some salient words of inspiration from Nina Simon (author of *The Participatory Museum*, 2010) speaking via Skype from sunny California, on how a museum can make a difference socially, how it can become **socially relevant**. Through a museum-wide strategy of what she calls '**radical collaboration**', Nina cited '**social bridging**' as central to her museum's social role, with the clear-sighted goal of empowering people to create '**stronger communities**'. Hers is a very useful case study in changing a museum in order to position local people at its heart – and doing whatever it takes to make it happen.

Nina began by saying, very clearly, 'I believe'...[in public participation]. The question we have to ask ourselves, following these years of funding by PHF in changing museums: '*Do our museums believe?*' Or rather, '*Do they believe enough? Do they believe at all?*'

Well, let's look again at the choices Nina faced in small-town California. As new Director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, she found herself with no money to work with at all. But did she back away from public engagement? No, she did not. Instead she and her staff built on the institution's uniqueness to get local people to value the museum. They did not go out cap-in-hand, asking for help. Rather, they did go out of the building, but to *offer their help* as part of a local network of community-based organisations. They worked hard and became part of that network and, bit by bit, began to establish their role at the community's heart – loved and much-used. They even found ways to generate funding by playing a role in their community, turning the museum into a multi-use community space at the heart of everything.

It didn't take much to do it: as Nina put it, "just a small revolution in thinking". In other words, it took vision, leadership and commitment. There was no compromising their central social mission, no matter how little money they had to work with. The commitment to full participation and partnership with their community was central – and soon became central to their success. This is a museum that believes in public participation. Yet, I ask again, '*Does your museum believe?*' '*Does it believe enough?*'

Hard choices

Based on her belief that this was the right thing to do, as Director, Nina found she also had very difficult choices to make; she took big risks in order to find a way to embed this work across her organisation. She temporarily laid off what would have seemed essential staff in most museums (including, for example, the archivist), saying “We’ll get back to that later...”

Could your Director or senior management make such a choice, re-allocating funds, sharing the jug of water differently? If not, why not?

Let’s look at some of Nina’s other approaches to embedding community engagement. She hired, from outside of the museum profession, people with on-the-ground community activist knowledge in order to help build the museum’s community bridges. She networked, networked, networked with community-based organisations – building alliances – as some of the museums in the *Our Museum* programme have similarly begun to do effectively. Most of all, she made sure this **philosophy of usefulness** to their community ran through and through her organisation, just as the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report had emphasised.

This was what *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* was all about, not only finding out whether museums made a difference, but also whether the commitment to public engagement ran throughout the organisation, from top down, bottom up and all the way across.

This takes courage and conviction – it takes leadership *with* conviction to see reduced funding as an opportunity for real collaboration.



Reflective practice means challenging assumptions

I want to take a little time here to talk about ‘reflective practice’, something I heard a lot of confusion about from within the peer group of museums in the *Our Museum* programme. The most common complaint tends to be, “It’s very hard to find time for it”. So what is it and why does it matter?

First, please indulge me a moment while I share some personal experiences that relate to this question. I was recently interviewed for PHF on the subject of reflective practice. I mentioned that, in all my 30-year career in museums, all of my ‘light bulb moments’ came as a result of having my assumptions challenged by others outside of museums. Conducting the UK-wide research for the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report was a spectacular example of this. It demonstrated how, given the chance and the right environment, people (community partners) had a great many valuable and important – essential – insights to share on the museum’s work, particularly, and unsurprisingly, on the museum’s work with community partners!

A community member once said to me that the cardinal rule for museums when working with people is, ‘never presume’. My very first lesson in this regard goes right back to my days in Western Canada when curating an exhibition at a regional museum. I drove out along a long dusty road, onto a First Nations reserve, with no small degree of nervousness (this was long before I began to collaborate with First Nations on a regular basis). I did not know what to expect. But I assumed many things. I saw poverty, and assumed I was there to help by offering to recognise their traditions and represent their story in my museum. I found instead that I was politely, graciously, challenged about doing ‘for’, instead of ‘with’. But, more importantly, those local First Nations leaders with whom I met that day skilfully moved the discussion along, wishing to talk instead about a global network of social justice, in solidarity with me. Having discovered I was Irish, for them the conversation was all about the solidarity of the *colonised*. It was then I began to notice the posters in the Tribal Council’s office, of other struggles: Palestinian, Mexican farm workers etc. They were not asking me to ‘recognise’ or to ‘represent’ them – neither were they asking to be the ‘beneficiaries’ of my museum. They were more interested in human rights, social justice and international solidarity across borders, and what we might do together if we worked in collaboration.

I drove back down the dusty road with a very different view of collaboration, and have had it reiterated many times since, in my reflective discussions with community partners within the ‘political’ space of the museum. I can think of many times when I’ve been brought up short by something said to me in those situations. But this only occurs if and when we take the opportunity to step back from the work and its museum-driven delivery schedules, to focus on the dynamics of the relationships between the museum staff and community partners. More often than not we find that, despite our good-will, we remain all tangled up in our own assumptions.

There was the Community Advisory Panel member when I was at the Manchester Museum, who, dissatisfied with the limits of ‘consultation’, walked out over the lack of genuine decision-making on offer, with the words, “You need us more than we need you”.

Then there was the community partner, angered at a failed collaboration in a promised co-produced exhibition on the highly emotive subject of 'race', who bitterly complained of the museum:

*We're here to challenge and I fear that others may not challenge us back. It's not for you to just listen to us being angry and just listen. The point is the dialogue. The point is that we could be totally wrong. I don't personally believe I am wrong – but I am willing to listen to somebody who totally disagrees with me.*⁵

In a museum in London a couple of years ago, a Chinese community member brought the museum's neighbourhood consultation meeting to a standstill by simply asking of the museum professionals present, "What is it the museum wants to do to me? What is it that needs changing or improving?" "What is it for?" In other words, how were the museum's public engagement practices 'useful', and for whom? And on what foundational assumptions does this work continue to be based?

Fundamentally, this woman's question asked what *theory of change* lies at the heart of the museum's social improvement agenda?⁶

All of the instances, the important personal and professional epiphanies cited above, came about through reflective practice – through the opening up of opportunities to stop, talk and reflect on the power relationship between museums and community partners. Reflective practice is not some abstract, theoretical or self-indulgent exercise. Such open conversations are critically important for the museum, a public institution, to learn from its stakeholders and, if necessary, to change. Throughout the process of compiling the study for *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?*, a report that centrally involved open, reflective discussion between museum staff and community partners – new and uncomfortable discussions – there were numerous instances like this, providing major learning points for the museums involved. There was the young man who gave the title to the report, who lined up community partners to queue for the cake offered by the museum staff, the cake representing publicly funded resources, and asked, "Whose cake is it anyway?"

A key lesson in this regard from the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* study, was that the collaborative, reflective process upon which it was based was new to the participating organisations and that, without this process of ongoing collaborative reflection with community partners, neither meaningful engagement nor sustained organisational change could occur.

⁵ 'Are Museums Racist?', 4 October 2007, AV recording, Manchester Museum.

⁶ A theory of change does the following, it

- defines all the building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks is interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions.
- describes the types of interventions (a single project or a comprehensive community initiative) that bring about the outcomes. Each outcome is tied to an intervention. See Centre for Theory of Change online: www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/

So what exactly is reflective practice?

Reflective practice is ‘the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning’, which, according to Schön,⁷ the originator of the term, is ‘one of the defining characteristics of professional practice’, but not as an end in itself – always so as to inform further planning and action. It is widely practised, for example, by health and education professionals.

The extensive action research I have undertaken around the UK over the past five years, for PHF (12 museums and galleries); the Tate Gallery (20 UK gallery partners); the Museum Ethnographers group (over 30 partner museums); and, recently, museums across Denmark for the Danish Museums Association, as well as anthropology museums in the USA, has shown that continued attempts at power-sharing and collaborating have not effectively challenged institutional habits of mind in museums.

To counter this, reflective practice is a method of ongoing practice-based learning that collaboratively invites critical examination of practice, values, concepts, and assumptions in order to support practitioners in meeting the museum’s collaborative objectives. It is a central tactic for change in museums.

Reflective practice in museums is about deepening individual and collective self-awareness in terms of how our socially derived knowledge and values shape the quality of our relationships with others and the power relations that underlie these.

It is not navel gazing. It’s about facing up to hard talk between museum staff and community partners – building trust/building bridges so there’s less of an ‘us and them’ relationship, and the museum becomes less of a separate entity and more of an emanation of communities. Ongoing reflective practice also provides ongoing support in the delivery of programmes and objectives.

It allows organisations and their community partners to collaboratively challenge habits of mind. In order to avoid mutual short-changing, museums and their community partners can only address the experience and impact of their partnership if both sides have the opportunity to discuss its purpose and applications, as **critical friends**. Otherwise, the museum falls back into a *comfort zone* where it occupies an imaginary centre, with everyone else on the periphery, as *passive beneficiaries*.

Unless the blockages to effective community engagement and participation that the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report uncovered are examined and confronted, we cannot hope to realise the social potential of museums. Without reflective practice we cannot engage in the kind of learning that museums require to respond flexibly and imaginatively to the dynamic socio-political environments in which museums are currently operating.

⁷ Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals Think In Action* (Basic Books)

What kinds of questions might be asked if engaged in reflective practice in relation to community engagement?

The central question is always: what *theory of change* is at work? (I was pleased to hear Nina Simon also use this term.) A theory of change, as reflected in the question from the Chinese community member noted earlier, can be a plus or a minus. We cannot know whether it is positive or not without an on-going process of reflection to explore change and how it happens – and what that means in terms of the part organisations play in a particular context, sector and/or group of people. It might include questioning:

- How museum professionals/ the museum describe their engagement work, and towards what outcome it is aimed (e.g. pre-set by funding agency requirements)
- If the rhetoric of *service* places the subject (community member) in the role of ‘supplicant’ or ‘beneficiary’ and the giver (the museum and its staff) in the role of ‘carer’. (How clear is it to the museum staff, or to the community members as the ‘beneficiaries’ on the receiving end, that power is at work within such language and in the roles it gives the institution in relation to its community partners?)

Engaging in reflective practice locates a programme or project within a wider analysis of how change comes about or how we assume it does, as the Chinese woman’s question suggested. Reflective practice may have positive and negative discoveries, such as in the negative dis-empowering assumption that museums are simply there to improve people.

Reflective practice helps articulate organisations’ understanding of change, and challenges them to explore it further. But it also acknowledges the complexity of change: the wider systems and actors that influence it. Fundamentally, it asks: ‘What’s working and not working?’, ‘What can I do about it?’, ‘Where can I get help to solve these problems?’, and ‘What other models of good practice are out there?’ (possibly from other sectors).

These types of conversations (so clearly encountered during the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* study) deepen our individual and collective self-awareness of how our values in museums shape the quality of our relationships with others, and the power relations that underlie them. Reflective practice matters because it is centrally about decolonising our thinking in museums. We simply cannot do it without our community partners.

In this regard, the Argentinian academic, Walter Mignolo, recently wrote to me:

*The first principle in decolonising our thinking in museums is to find – and understand – where we are located in the matrix of power, by race, class, educational privilege, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, language, etc. When we came into the world, the matrix was already there, and had a place for each of us.*⁸

⁸ From Walter Mignolo’s e-mail correspondence with the author, September 2014. Walter D. Mignolo is an Argentine semiotician and professor at Duke University, USA, who has published extensively on different aspects of the modern and colonial world, exploring concepts such as global coloniality, the geopolitics of knowledge, transmodernity, border thinking, and pluriversality. See <http://waltermignolo.com/>

Museums reproduce this. We have a situation where the museum can be committed to social change but as an institution has difficulty in changing itself. That is why the *Our Museum* programme has put reflective practice at the heart of its programme of change.

Learning organisations

Yet, I hear you say you don't have time for reflection, although you recognise its value. But do publicly funded institutions really have the right to ignore this central element? Organisational learning, in which leaders and managers give priority to stakeholder voices and to learning as integral to practice, is increasingly recognized as critical to improved performance, particularly in publicly funded institutions such as education and the health service. This means that time has to be built in by the organisations and seen as an integral part of professional work and development, not as an optional add-on.

Among those museums engaged in the *Our Museum* programme, those museums that are prioritising such organisational development, strengthening their connections to other organisations, networks and wider society, can genuinely be called 'learning organisations'.

Such ongoing reflective practice must be centred on institutionalising a radical organization-wide approach to **accountability, learning and planning**, prioritising public accountability in the museum's relations with community partners and so revolutionizing the way the museum does its business. Museums and their community partners must become *skilled reflective practitioners*, using a range of tools to promote structured individual and group reflection at critical points in a project cycle. The use of action research and reflective practice models can be employed to focus on the insights we can collaboratively draw from the actions we have collectively taken. This is how we learn together, and from one another. This is how we learn and improve.

It *must* be part of the organisation's core way of doing business.

But beyond the moral reasons why we, in publicly funded institutions, need to collectively reflect on practice *with* our stakeholders, in these challenging times there is a new and urgent need for museums to develop their *adaptive capacity*, which necessitates collective, reflective practice so that museums may quickly adapt to working differently.

More visible communities

I have discussed some of the problems still made evident by those involved in the *Our Museum* project about funding and reflective practice. But there is an element of change of which I still don't see quite enough evidence in the programme, despite its centrality. Ironically, this is *community engagement and participation in the programme of change itself* – not just in community projects. Even though there are certainly more – and more *vocal* – community partners involved in the peer review meetings, which is great to see, there appears to be still too little evidence of community partners involved in reflective practice as 'critical friends'.

Yet, PHF's recent briefing document *Communities and Museums as Active Partners: Emerging learning from the Our Museum initiative* states that:

*Most Our Museum organisations are working with critical friends: a trusted person outside the museum who takes the time to fully understand the context of the work and the outcomes that the organisation wants to achieve, asks provocative questions, provides additional data, evidence or lessons from elsewhere that give a fresh perspective, and offers a critique of work.*⁹

For those organisations making use of it, this resourcing of critical friends by the *Our Museum* project is – as a means to provide a framework for reflective practice – creating a safe space for it to take place. Responding to the fact that most of the *Our Museum* organisations have stated that they can't find time for reflective practice, this external facilitation via the use of critical friends is intended to help create that space. It is impressive that in many cases the use of critical friends resourced by the *Our Museum* programme has been requested *jointly* by staff and community partners, and they have *jointly* agreed what the focus of each critical friend's work should be. So, while these critical friends are not themselves community partners, in each case the work they are doing is aimed at facilitating reflective practice *between* the museum and its community partners (in very much the same way as I had to do, in acting as catalyst for those difficult conversations between museum staff and community partners while researching the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report).

Thus, the use of this external facilitator becomes an organisational mechanism that allows the museum to 'make time' available for reflective practice with community partners. Furthermore, the intention is for the critical friend to ensure that all voices are heard and awkward questions asked, avoiding the possibility for conversations between museums and community partners to get stuck, with those involved unable to free themselves from pre-set roles, expectations, language and outcomes. The critical friend's role is to help raise awareness of these pitfalls, while unlocking and making possible open and honest reflective practice with staff and community partners.

However, the use of external critical friends is only ever a temporary measure, in place to help break the log-jam of communication with community partners. Reflective practice is intended to be an ongoing process, embedded within the organisation's normal ways of working – a back and forth process of communication to which the organisation must commit so as to avoid continuing the situation of organisational dominance that *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* highlighted. To make such a commitment, the museum and its community partners must develop their own ways to communicate better and more frequently. For as Boast puts it, "No matter how much museums have argued for a pluralistic approach...[the] control has largely remained in the hands of the museum".¹⁰ Collectively, museum staff and community partners must remain vigilant, for there is always the danger of the museum slipping back into setting the agenda, providing token consultations without authentic decision-making power. Such a situation subtly perpetuates a centre/periphery model of museum public engagement, in which these

⁹ Our Museum briefing document, November 2014, available online at www.ourmuseum.org.uk

¹⁰ Boast, R.B. (2011). Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as contact zone revisited. *Museum Anthropology* 34(1): 56-70.

encounters between community partners and museum staff take place inside the museum, as Boast astutely puts it, “an asymmetric space where the periphery comes to gain some small, momentary and strategic advantage, but where the centre ultimately gains...”¹¹ The subtle ways that such well-meaning relationships actually serve to disempower and control people reflects what Cornwall pointed out, that:

*having a seat at the table is a necessary but not sufficient condition for exercising voice. Nor is presence at the table [on the part of institutions] the same as a willingness to listen and respond.*¹²

Yet one is again encouraged by the *Our Museum* programme’s progress in this regard, for it seems that some of the museums involved have already accumulated evidence of community partners beginning to challenge their museums in terms of the museum’s local relevance and engagement practices, and they are getting things changed as a result. So perhaps this isn’t just about community partners being ‘vocal’, or tinkering around with the museums pre-set agenda (at least in some of the participating museums), but community partners actually understanding and undertaking their role as active citizens, challenging the institution and taking this empowerment back into their organisations and communities. If this is so, we need more evidence of this capability development as a result of engaging with these museums in this way. It would be helpful, not only for the museums involved in the programme, but for the cultural sector more broadly, to hear more from these critical voices and their experiences with museums.

Defining ‘peers’

The PHF briefing document *Communities and Museums as Active Partners: Emerging learning from the Our Museum initiative* further notes that: “Peer learning is an effective method of encouraging the sharing of experience, knowledge, information and learning”.¹³

While it is very important for museum staff members to support their professional peers in this work inside their own museum and with professionals from other museums, this was only ever one element of the recommendations from the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* report and the subsequent *Our Museum* programme. By this stage in the process of organisational change, all the participating museums should be entrenched in community partner discussions – in joint reflecting, planning and decision-making. Reflective practice is not just about talking to ourselves. Important as this element may be, *Our Museum* is not simply a professional support group. We must hear from far more community partners – strong voices from community partner organisations, community activists, helping to make change happen in these museums. Museums cannot do this without them.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Cornwall, A. (2008) *Democratising Engagement: What the UK can Learn from International Experience* (Demos, London)

¹³ Our Museum briefing document, November 2014, available online at www.ourmuseum.org.uk

However, there are some cases in the *Our Museum* programme in which staff and community partners are actively learning together, visiting other organisations and their community partners to meet with them and learn what they are doing. In these cases, the community partners play a central role in the visit and discussions. Such joint learning begins to demonstrate the necessary shift away from an ‘us’ and ‘them’ situation – something the community partners themselves noted at the peer review.

Thus the distinction between museum staff and community partners begins to melt away and each can truly begin to refer to the other as ‘peers’. It would be very encouraging to see such a shift become more widespread among the group of museums involved.

Advocating for the ‘useful museum’

Penultimately, I want to talk about advocacy. When we started this, before the *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* study was even complete, we talked about it being a ‘movement’ – a movement that places the social – people – at the heart of the museum. *Our Museum* is such a movement. It does not work as a model – each museum and its situation is unique – but there are shared values and techniques that could be summarised in much the same way that Nina Simon is so able to articulate in terms of the social vision for her museum. I’ve personally always liked the notion of the **useful museum** as a simple, but elegant concept.

But, more importantly, it seems high time for *advocacy* – for this movement to make noise – for all of you collectively and individually to be making that noise, not only for your own institution but for public participation – empowerment – for museums being useful in social bridging in order to build stronger communities. This, it seems to me, is a hugely important outcome of the *Our Museum* change-making process for museums, with the policy-makers (local, regional and national) in your sights. It is more than ever important to show policy-makers and funders that museums must be supported in embedding long-term partnership work with communities, to develop different ways of working, and to show how it can be done, with effective systems for dialogue, shared decision-making and ongoing reflection in place. And there is certainly ‘learning’ to be shared too, with those museums for whom the obstacles, so far, seem just too difficult.

Our Museum – ‘getting it’

Finally, I want to talk about all the museum staff members who bravely signed up to the *Our Museum* programme. Despite the difficulties, they’re still working away. Despite the criticism at the end of Year One of the programme from the *Our Museum* Steering Group (‘a good wake-up call’, as one of the museums told me), each museum is still trying, and most of all, learning and changing. I was so pleased to hear anecdotally of this from many of the individual museum staff members (too many to quote here).

It is the ‘getting it’ that has impressed me most – no matter what the difficulties may be – the hard talk, the setbacks. It is the ongoing commitment to the values that underpin this way of working that we carry with us into all of our work.

So, yes – when I wrote *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?*, you said you were ‘stuck’. Now most of you are not. Admittedly some are further down the road than others in transforming their museum or feeling that it’s possible – but the level of self-awareness and discussion has shifted and been raised exponentially thanks to PHF’s *Our Museum* programme of change for museums. Now we just need, as Nina put it, ‘a small revolution’ in these museums, and borrow a little of Nina’s ‘can-do’ attitude that says, ‘Bring it on, whatever the difficulties’. For this is what we, as museum professionals in the 21st century, are here to do.

And, we may just have to get used to the fact that within this ‘movement’ for change in museums, there will be very little cake!



