

Reflecting with stakeholders

Unless we have these types of conversations

how on earth do we know

what's working and what isn't working?

Otherwise we're working on assumptions all the time

and uncomfortable assumptions.

Because in my experience, most of us well meaning,

very well meaning and committed staff members in museums

have in the back of our minds

the knowledge that a lot of our efforts have not been working,

despite what it is that we report to the funding agencies.

So the point is how will we know

unless we create a situation

where people feel safe enough

and there's enough trust in the room

for people to say what's really happening.

That's the only way that we can

absolutely inform practice in order to develop it.

Speaking personally, the greatest challenges to me

in my practice, in my professional life

have been challenges from other people

outside of the museum world

who have challenged me consistently

over decades of my practice about my own thinking,

about the institutionalisation of my own thinking.

And I have felt that, consistently,

that it is incredibly difficult to do

internally, only within the organisation.

You can organise support networks,
you can support each other.

That's not quite the same thing
as developing critical friends
and critical friendships with those
who can challenge your thinking
in terms of the privilege we occupy.

The reality is we occupy that privilege within our institutions;
educationally, in terms of our class,
usually in terms of race, who knows?

A whole matrix of privilege.

But it's very, very difficult to see outside of.

You really need that shaken up.

I'm always a little bit worried
when I see reflective practice
becoming an internal conversation only.

I'm not saying that isn't important;
it's incredibly important
to support people individually
as they're going through what is actually
a painful process of unlearning
their way of working, their way of thinking,
the assumptions they're making.

But the light bulb moments
have almost always taken place
when you're in a room with those outside of the institution,

who are asking you some very straightforward,
but really pertinent questions about the way you're even
framing the sentence, how you're thinking.

That's what we need to shake up,
and that's what reflective practice does.

Well, it's very hard to be in and out at the same time,
to facilitate that conversation while you are a part of it.

While you are representing an institution
how can you be the facilitator?

I've seen it most effectively done
when we actually bring in somebody
to take on the role of facilitator.

Especially somebody who has a bag of tricks,
who can help open up conversations
in new and different ways so that those who are most
articulate and confident and with an education
don't dominate that conversation.

So there are lots of tricks of the trade
in terms of generating that kind
of conversation initially until you start to build up
that kind of relationship.

I know I had a community advisory panel for years.
It took years for that to develop its confidence
so that it could challenge, in the kind of ways
and boy, did it ever challenge when it found its speed!

But those conversations are so important.

It's very important, I think

to think about who's involved though, in these conversations.

I'm very impressed when I see

National Museums Wales, for example,

working with activist organisations across Wales

who already arrive into that conversation

ready to ask the hard questions.

This is what we're talking about here.

We're not talking about asking

people that we randomly choose

and put in awkward positions

of representing what exactly,

to come in and start discussing

the allocation of public funding

and how the museum uses its public funding.

The most important thing is

that we are talking to activist organisations

and a wide range of them, to be part of this reflective

practice and decision-making that leads to planning and action.

All of it must be cyclical and must feed in to a radical

and let's use the word revolutionary new way of thinking

about what museums do and how they operate.