

Mapping to Engage: What Works and What Doesn't

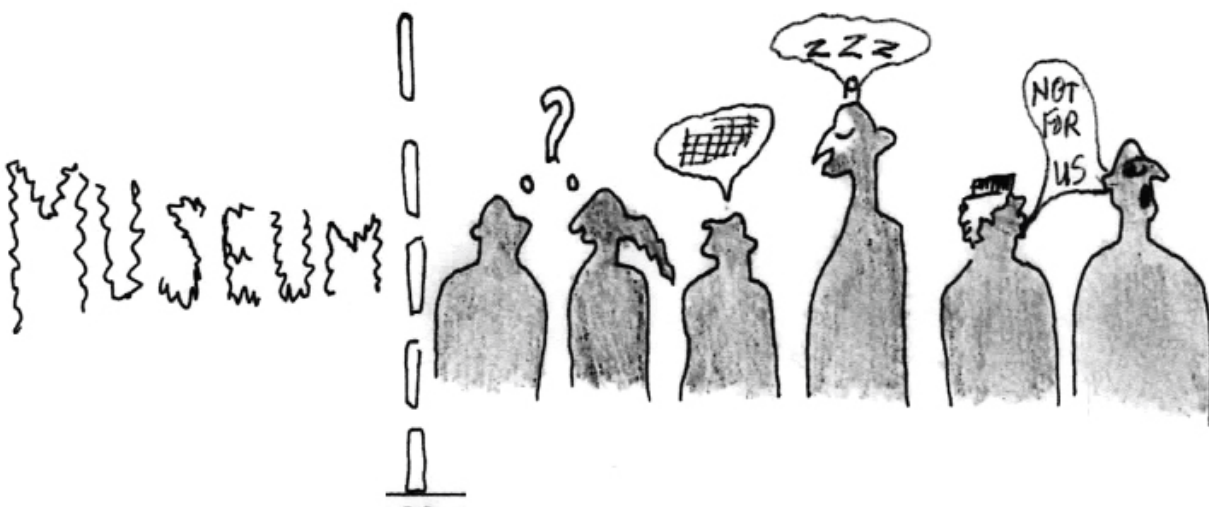
Extracts from a session at The Museums Association Annual Conference and Exhibition,
Liverpool, 2013

The following is an extract of notes from a conference workshop run by community partners from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation *Our Museum* programme. Delegates collated good practice tips for museums and galleries initiating and developing worthwhile connections and participation with communities. Each group discussed the following inter-related themes:

1. Identifying, locating, mapping, and methods of initiating bridges with communities
2. Meeting their interests and ours, developing mutual exchange, contributions and value
3. Locating and trying to work with communities outside of our boxes or familiar practice

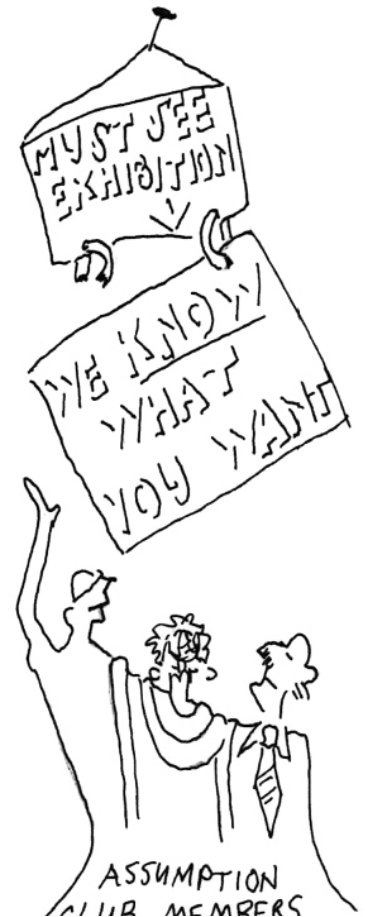
Each group compiled a practical action list of what works and what doesn't, based on their own experiences. What doesn't work can be seen as a list of common pitfalls and items to discuss with colleagues and italicisation community partners. It would be useful for the museum and gallery partners to interrogate each action in terms of organisational mechanisms: how this is being done in the organisation (if at all); who is responsible; how it is resourced; and if it is included in a work plan with time allocated to it.

What doesn't work



What Doesn't Work: Communication and Knowledge

- Preconceptions about what communities want
- Assuming people will be interested in the museum's project
- Lack of effective mechanisms for communicating with communities and finding out what they want
- Assuming that communities either have knowledge about the museum, or that they don't have knowledge
- Assuming that expert historic knowledge and interest is automatically held by source communities
- Language: professional acronyms and jargon – a lack of awareness that words can mean different things to different people and in different contexts
- Not allowing for attitudinal change, both on the part of the museum and of communities.



What Doesn't Work: Museum Management and Funding Issues

- Internal lack of a clear purpose and policy around participation
- Lack of commitment and buy-in from both staff and the community
- Short-term project funding and short-term contracts for staff running participatory programmes – relationships are formed and then everything finishes
- Staff changes with no continuity
- Museum having an agenda that is predetermined and inward-looking
- A project without structure and clear roles for people (staff and communities)
- Museums don't listen to partners
- Lack of follow through after a project
- Over-estimating a museum's capacity to deliver – have to be realistic
- Museum management having unrealistic expectations of volunteers and community members
- Not allowing enough time
- Bolting on things as an after-thought
- Tokenism – doing things in order to tick boxes
- Red-tape from local authorities, especially around sharing decision-making with communities



What Doesn't Work: Understanding Communities

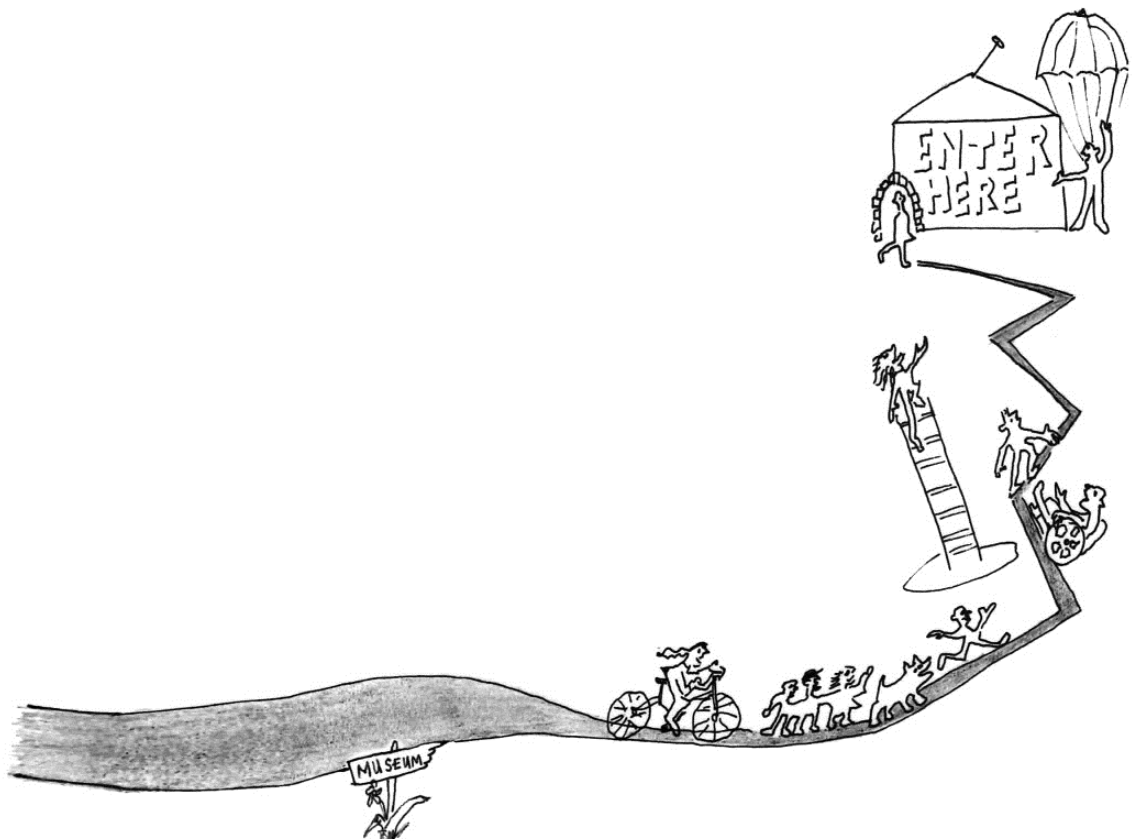
- Over-reliance on the same groups – ‘the usual suspects’
- Lack of ownership by the community partners
- Working with self-appointed ‘leaders’ who do not represent the range of people within that community
- Community representatives becoming gatekeepers rather than being people who are genuinely interested – and so becoming barriers to more people getting involved rather than enablers
- Reliance on individual staff holding the contacts with community organisations – if they leave the relationship can break down
- Not understanding that communities change, move on, develop, etc.
- Towns and communities which are separate and have barriers between them (e.g. in large, predominantly rural areas)
- Hard to reach isolated people are not part of a group



What works

What Works: Museums and Galleries Making Contact

- Know who you want to work with, i.e. are you targeting particular groups, and if so, why?
- Identify what you do as an organisation, and ask the communities what they want/are interested in – only they know
- Develop clarity of offer from the museum to the community
- Use existing networks, e.g. third sector agencies, especially with harder to reach groups
- Often easier to start with a group who already meet/know each other
- Use obvious connections, e.g. a project about WW1 service families
- Use and understand council/census statistics to learn ‘facts’ about the community – use information that already exists
- Identify communities and leaders of those communities
- Make contact through children at school
- Mosaic profiling of visitors
- Record postcodes
- Target established groups
- Tap into people with direct personal experience relevant to user group, e.g. people with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD)
- Acknowledge that some communities don’t want to participate



What Works: Planning and Resourcing by the Museum

- Clear organisational priorities from the outset – commitment from governing body, director and senior staff
- Long-term planning to build trust and community engagement from the outset
- Make sure that adequate resources are in place
- Job descriptions with responsibility for participation – not an add-on
- Ensure there is TIME built into work plans to create a relationship
- Involve a facilitator/go-between at the start, as an independent bridge
- Create a 'safe', non-judgmental, culturally comfortable environment/space – ask the communities what sort of space they require (e.g. Muslim women will not generally come into a space that displays nudity)
- Plan for museum staff working off-site
- Offer use of your venue FREE
- For open-air museums, ensure you use all the facilities



What Works: Developing and Sustaining the Relationships

- Establish shared aims, goals and expectations from the start
- Ongoing commitment – show that your museum is in it for the long term
- Develop the process together
- Create ownership and have someone 'trusted' who is a member of the community leading the project
- Ensure the involvement is meaningful – not only consultation
- Respecting confidentiality on difficult issues
- Ensure you give back as much as you take – mutual benefit
- The museum as an open and honest broker/a safe place to bring ideas and discuss
- Communicate that EVERYONE is welcome
- Make sure you are inclusive and don't accidentally exclude people
- Be prepared to allow relationships with communities to grow organically – don't rush the process
- Start small then increase incrementally – numbers increase as you involve people, project/programme by programme
- Volunteer opportunities that address the needs of the volunteers rather than the museum



- Think about the whole family experience and match activities to different age groups
- Work across generations wherever possible
- Discuss with partners and report honestly on what doesn't work
- A good outcome is when a community is empowered to run its own project

