

Using historical memory in museum learning and interpretation

Emma King and Tracy Craggs

This workshop was based on an EU partnership project at the Royal Armouries Museum that explores the concept of historical memory in the secondary history curriculum. Partners from six EU countries are developing and testing a methodology that uses sites and collections to engage students with the idea of historical memory and broaden their understanding of how history is created, constructed and used. The project website is <http://www.memoriesatschool.eu/>

We began with a brief discussion of the definitions we're using for the project. These are somewhat simplistic, but they provide a common starting point and framework:

- **History** is a record of past events, though it is not a neutral record and will always be incomplete and problematic
- **Memories** are constantly being made and forgotten. They can be manipulated and changed
- **Social memory** is where a group of people share a common history. It is crucial in creating and maintaining individual and social identity
- **Historical memory** is how we as a society remember the past.

Our EU project has developed a four-step process to work through these ideas with students. There is a more detailed description at <http://www.memoriesatschool.eu/pilot-experience-at-united-kingdom/> but essentially the stages are:

1. Students researched the history of a particular event (in our case D-Day), comparing history and memory sources and learning about the event from different viewpoints. This included a visit to the museum
2. Students met and interviewed people with their own memories of the Second World War, including D-Day veterans
3. The students explored how D-Day and other events of the Second World War have been remembered (or forgotten), commemorated and interpreted in social and historical memory
4. Finally, students created their own interpretations based on their research by making digital stories.

Our workshop questioned what these ideas mean for museums, linking in with conference discussions on co-creation and the politics of interpretation. We asked, can the concept of historical memory help us engage audiences more effectively with museum interpretation outside of formal learning programmes? Can it bring a different dimension to interpreting collections? How can museums be more transparent about our processes and encourage visitors to understand how history 'works'? How can we be more open to challenging, and encouraging visitors to challenge, our interpretations of the past?

Museums are moving towards more openness in their interpretation, for example through co-creation of exhibitions with community groups. This brings with it questions about curatorial 'voice', ownership and control. It is still the convention to

structure an exhibition around a theme or narrative rather than explore how histories are constructed. Museums frequently present memory as history, particularly when oral histories are used in exhibitions, without acknowledging that the point of view they are presenting is partial and incomplete. Sometimes this can lead to conflict. Perhaps the best-known example is the dispute over the Enola Gay exhibition put on by the US National Air and Space Museum in 1995 to mark 50 years since the bombing of Hiroshima. Historian Susan Crane wrote of the controversy, “Personal historical memory met institutional memory head on, and the collision was catastrophic”. The issue is well documented at

<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/enola/>

A comparison of the Enola Gay exhibit with the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum illustrates how two objects in different locations evoke radically different memories of the same event.





Workshop participants raised the practical and methodological challenges of using historical memory as a framework for approaching exhibitions. We discussed the difficulty of the concepts – clearly the relationship between history and memory is not straightforward, and ‘historical memory’ is both a contested term for historians and a very difficult one to unpick. There are also questions about whether potentially ‘navel-gazing’ exhibitions that examine historical interpretation are really what visitors want.

However, I’d argue that social history curators already work in the field of historical memory. Museums increasingly now collect memories and stories about objects, which can be as important as the objects themselves. We collect individual memories in the form of oral history collections. We use objects, and the memories attached to them, to create interpretations that contribute to the creation of social and historical memory. None of this work is neutral. I’d like to suggest that museums could concentrate less on communicating information and more on engaging people in a dialogue about **how** historical interpretations are formulated, and consequently how they are used (and abused) in the present.

From our project, we learned that:

- Using the frame of historical memory can help young people, and potentially museum visitors, understand that there is no one interpretation of history and broaden their awareness of other people’s perceptions and experiences
- Encouraging students to deconstruct and question the interpretation in Royal Armouries exhibition galleries made them think more deeply about historical narrative and how it’s constructed
- Students had a far more mature response to the museum’s collection, particularly difficult objects such as Second World War weapons, when they understood the memories those objects held for people who used them

- Meeting living witnesses was an important part of the learning process for young people. However, oral history was more powerful for the students when they had the opportunity to question and compare different narratives rather than seeing it as a piece of evidence telling them ‘what really happened’
- Getting young people to deconstruct how interpretations are made and how social memory is created made them appreciate the relevance of history in their own lives. For example, we looked at how history is subject to political and media manipulation. The Sun Newspaper’s reaction to the December 2011 Euro crisis is a good example – it relies on readers recognising a particular interpretation of history:

<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/politics/3988056/David-Cameron-savaged-on-Euro.html>

David Cameron savaged on Euro

PM under attack from EU leaders and own MPs



Lame duck or bulldog spirit? ... Tory MPs fear Cameron will return waving a worthless deal like Neville Chamberlain, left
But the PM insists he will be more like Churchill — and veto EU deal if necessary. Will he grab victory after all?

Our EU project is due to finish in December by which time we’ll have a final methodology that will be available on the project website. We’re also considering further funding bids to explore the relevance of historical memory in the context of museum interpretation rather than formal learning and would love to hear from anyone with an interest in this subject.