

Challenging History was a partnership project between Historic Royal Palaces Tower of London, Imperial War Museum, MLA London and City University London funded through the MLA TPYF phase 2 grants programme, supported by Big Lottery, and drew upon the experiences of Imperial War Museum's Their Past Your Future InSite programme.

Challenging History continues as a programme run by:

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For the full report and more information about the current programme see

www.city.ac.uk/cpm/challenginghistory

Front cover image Sachsenhausen by Alex Drago from the series 'It Simply Was'
Designed by Zinta Jaunitis



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CHALLENGING HISTORY

Executive Summary

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November 2009

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Challenging History was a series of four seminars held between June and October 2009 at **Historic Royal Palaces Tower of London**. Learning practitioners from the heritage and museum sector and academia were invited to apply to take part in the sessions, and 27 participants were identified. The programme was conceived to explore the role, aims and outcomes of heritage and museum learning programmes in relation to difficult and controversial subjects.

The series aimed to support participants in:

- Articulating the value of delivering learning programmes in their institutions around difficult and controversial subjects
- Identifying suitable approaches to different types of subjects
- Informing their own practice

The programme comprised of four half-day seminars organised around a different set of themes and objectives, each utilising a variety of group tasks. Discussions were recorded, coded and are summarised in the full report. Questions relating to each of the seminar themes are also outlined in the full report, enabling heritage practitioners to explore them in relation to their own practice in this area.

Over the course of the seminars, a number of key obstacles were identified which currently serve to problematise work in areas of perceived difficulty and/or sensitivity. These included:

1. Lack of a coherent evidence base to underpin or inform practice
2. Museum culture more broadly (perceived by practitioners as somewhat risk-averse and operating with timescales and agendas that make sustainability an ongoing issue)
3. Lack of communication (within and between institutions, and across the sector)
4. Lack of training
5. Lack of time and/or space in institutions (both physically, and in terms of individual capacity)
6. Individual avoidance, embarrassment or discomfort in working with these heritages

By the final seminar, participants were able to formulate a response to these challenges, working toward a strategy for moving the **Challenging History** agenda forwards. The following were identified as key steps:

1. Defining the aims and objectives of **Challenging History**
2. Getting challenging histories on the agenda more broadly
3. Initiating organisational change on a number of levels: communication, training, creating space for dialogue (between staff and with audiences), and formalising opportunities in which individuals can ask for help and support.
4. Increasing communication around key issues and practices, and between institutions and audiences
5. Increasing the confidence of museum professionals in tackling such heritages: through training, communication, the production of resources and the sharing of 'best practice'.
6. Allowing for new approaches and methodologies including taking more (considered and well-conceived) risks.
7. Continuing the **Challenging History** network (and the discussions that have been generated)
8. Implementing a structure for delivering all of the above (through MLA or other professional body)

The **Challenging History** network scripted a manifesto which will (it is hoped) spark debate and begin to move the agenda forwards in the ways identified above. It may even offer some guidance for those engaged or interested in the delivery of programmes which seek to challenge – the audience, the institution, the sector and its authority, and the very heritage itself.

Manifesto

The museum and heritage sector has an important role to play covering contentious issues in their spaces and programmes, and must do this work to stay relevant to our audiences.

We will

1. Acknowledge history is complicated and that we need to take risks in delivering it.
2. Build our confidence in delivering contentious issues by creating a process, supported by peer review, for sector staff to develop their expertise.
3. Recognise successful practice and agree what produces quality programmes.
4. Create a forum for dialogue across the sector and beyond, about best practice. Facilitate conversations at subject and audience level online and in person. Support mentoring and develop skills profiles. Advocate for this work across the sector and beyond.
5. Conduct rigorous evaluation and research of delivery of contentious history in museums and heritage sites, how it works and what it does.
6. Coordinate a central programme of pilot projects, evaluations, case studies and body of evidence, identify and track the training offer.