

DIFFICULT HISTORIES USEFUL GUIDE

ADVICE ON DEALING WITH DIFFICULT HISTORIES IN MUSEUM LEARNING SESSIONS

- **Listening:** is the single most important skill you can demonstrate when communicating to all ages on any given subject
- **Assumption or preconceived ideas:** Many young people will be encountering this history for the first time. There is no reason that they will know or even should know who or what is being discussed.
- **Graphic Imagery:** IWM does not recommend the use of graphic images or text in learning sessions about the Holocaust. Photographs were often taken by perpetrators and therefore not with the permission of those being photographed which raises ethical issues around their use and raises questions about how we show respect for the dignity of victims. We also try to consider the emotional maturity of the young people we are working with. The question we pose for ourselves and other professionals is 'Why are you using this material? Is it for 'shock' value?' If so, we would argue, the purpose of using the material becomes its shock value rather than as an opportunity to encourage deeper engagement with the questions and issues the Holocaust raises for humanity.
- **'Sensational' Objects:** Museum objects can have a very dramatic impact in a learning session. Trench clubs, weapons and edged weapons should be used only after careful consideration and within the appropriate context. Steel Harvest objects (battle field finds), Dead Man's Pennies or final letters home need to be considered carefully and in context when used. Experience has demonstrated the use of 'sensational' objects is best kept to a minimum. Guns, knives and Trench clubs are very exciting and fascinating to all ages. However, having demonstrated them in handling sessions they are then put away so that the session can continue
- Ordinary objects from violent, challenging histories have proven to be the most successful ways of facilitating discussion, for example people's shoes
- Challenging history is fascinating for many people and people should be encouraged to research these areas as in any other subject
- It is problematic to use history to teach moral lessons about the present – there is a real danger of 'instrumentalising' the past for present concerns. However, that doesn't mean there aren't comparisons that can be explored between history and today but such discussions need to be handled very carefully. If we are honest we cannot fully understand what it was like to live through the Second World War. But it is possible to encourage historical empathy using original source material and/or artefacts and replicas. If you are using re-enactment or drama-based activities you need to be absolutely clear about when the performance starts and when it finishes and that it is a performance not historical fact. This is not to discourage introducing discussion about historical events through creative interpretation.

- We don't advise educators/teachers setting up learning sessions or visits to museums with phrases such as: "This is a really terrible subject. You may feel really bad about this." Many will not and could leave a session feeling confused about why they don't while those who have been feeling anxious may have their feelings of fear/unease increased.
- IWM tries to individualise historical events by translating statistics and maps into personal stories, objects or photographs. It is important for learners to understand the scale of events and numbers involved but also that each statistic was a real person with a life before they became involved in the historical event they are learning about. This approach can help engage learners more deeply in events that happened a long time ago.
- Try to avoid portraying individuals or groups solely as victims and you can do this by placing the events they were part of in historical context. Give time for discussion and reflection on people's lives before and if they survived, after these events so their contribution to the world we live in is recognised. This approach can also help learners think about the loss to the world/humanity as a result of the destruction of human beings, their cultural traditions, experiences and memories.
- The suffering of all victims of violence, discrimination and hatred should be considered by learners. Avoid comparing the suffering of any one group with that of another through your choice of text, images, objects and the language you use
- Be specific, particularly with language and this will encourage learners to do likewise. Where they exist, use definitions and, where appropriate, acknowledge debates amongst historians and others about historical events and how we define them. Furthermore, try to avoid euphemisms or at least explain what and why they were used, particularly by perpetrators to disguise their actions e.g. 'The Final Solution'
- Emphasising an individuals' humanity rather than focusing solely on the manner of their death, injuries caused on the battlefield or their persecution by others can encourage empathy with individuals from the past. With this in mind, consider the dignity of the people involved in historical events when selecting material to use with learners. Ask yourself why you have chosen a particular image, object or text before using it: is it just to 'fill a gap' in a session; think about the photographers' purpose and how you might approach this issue, for example if you are using photographic evidence of the Holocaust that deliberately frames Jewish people in a negative or derogatory way; are you 'instrumentalising' the past to prove a personal point and consider how learners, particularly young learners, react to seeing a graphic photograph, a challenging object or reading a sensitive piece of text?

Ethnicity and Empire

- If you are intending to use images of black or Indian soldiers in a learning session it is not necessary to say “You can see these black soldiers are cleaning their rifles” but “You can see that these soldiers cleaning their rifles” and then wait for further responses to the ethnicity of the people in the photograph.
- Resist the temptation to rewrite history by using inclusive imagery throughout.
- It is not possible to fully enter the mind-set of the past. Reminders of this are good practice and can save a lot of time once you remove the desire to use the benefit of hindsight
- It is acknowledged that many people have feelings of discomfort when talking about the Empire. The museum has decided to meet this subject head on without having to take a position
- Rushed or apparently short-sighted decisions are made in every conflict. These motives may be difficult for us to understand now.

SOME IDEAS FOR DEALING WITH EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

- Being able to introduce subjects in a non-sensationalist way is more effective if you wish to encourage mature and continued enquiry
- Try to frame questions rather than something too direct such as: “How do you feel about this?” This sort of question is too broad and can make an individual feel they have to share something that for them may be private. Any extra pressure should be avoided.
- Engaging with challenging and sensitive history can be daunting. It can also be done successfully and with positive results. One of the ways to encourage engagement is to avoid using emotive language. Otherwise you may heighten feelings of anxiety or provoke anxiety where it did not exist and this may cause the learner to disengage with the subject. It may also lead to a purely emotional engagement with the past rather than one that enables learners to critically engage with historical events and their interpretations by historians and museums