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Including people with learning difficulties in cultural and heritage sites

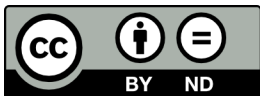
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Including people with learning difficulties in cultural and heritage sites

Abstract

This paper examines the processes involved in a participatory inclusive research project in Liverpool and Merseyside, UK. The project involved 25 people with learning difficulties – the Heritage Forum - visiting 13 cultural and heritage sites on more than 50 occasions across a 15 month period. The research provides a much needed resource at a time when there is a lack of provision for, and research into, the intellectual accessibility of cultural and heritage sites in the UK and globally. This paper details the research approach taken by the Heritage Forum, providing a flexible protocol about ways of working with groups and individuals with learning difficulties. It also reports on the Heritage Forum’s general findings about the cultural and heritage sites, providing some initial guidance about how to best include this diverse population.

Keywords: Inclusive research; cultural and heritage sites; access; learning difficulties

Introduction

There is a growing appreciation of the need to involve people with learning difficulties in assessing provision within cultural and heritage sites (Rayner 1998, Economou 1999, Ruiz 2004, Rix, 2005) and of the value of cultural and heritage sites to this diverse

population and the practitioners who work alongside them. (Hooper-Greenhill et al 2002). However, there is still a lack of resources targeted specifically at those who face barriers in relation to structuring thought, remembering and communicating. Most of the developments that have facilitated access for people with learning difficulties are based on improving access for other groups of disabled users (Ruiz 2004).

This paper reports on the Access to Heritage Project, an innovative inclusive research project carried out by twenty five people with learning difficulties across an eighteen month period, in which they made over fifty visits to cultural and heritage sites to assess the accessibility of provision. Prior to this project, the members of the research group had rarely visited such sites, if at all. The recommendations of this group, known as the Heritage Forum, provide valuable guidance to sites about how to engage with these users and enhance their visitor experience.

Current guidance for cultural and heritage sites

Cultural and heritage sites have few resources to assist in developing their provision for people with learning difficulties, in attracting this audience and in dealing with issues of intellectual access. The Museum Learning Collaborative archives (2003), for example, do not mention this area, whilst Inclusive Information (Playforth 2003) offers half a page of

¹ The term ‘people with learning difficulties’ is one of many used to describe people who are identified as having differences in relation to thinking, remembering and communicating. These individuals are commonly sorted into a whole raft of label subgroups which change across the years (Rix 2006). In using the term ‘people with learning difficulties’ this paper adopts the language advocated by self advocates such as Simons (1992) and self advocacy groups such as People First (1992, 2006). They request that labelled individuals are recognised as people before anything else, and that we use the term ‘learning difficulties’ to remind others that they can learn for the whole of their lives like everyone else.

advice; and the National Endowment for the Arts' fifty page Accessibility Checklist (NES 2004) has just three mentions of people with learning difficulties.

A clear challenge for those sites wishing to broaden their provision for people with learning difficulties and for those trying to provide clear recommendations of how to do so, is the enormous range of individuals who can fall within this label. For example, in 2006 a report from the Deputy Prime Minister's Office recognised the value of good signage using both pictures and symbols along with text. However, they noted that 'There is no generally accepted definition that clearly defines different forms or degrees of learning disabilities' (p13) and that because of the lack of research across the breadth of individuals with this label it could not recommend a single symbol system. Their conclusions, therefore, turned the problem on its head, recommending that designers reduce the need for complex signage systems by creating simple building layouts, with good sight lines, providing clearly defined routes with limited numbers of choices, incorporating landmark features and readily identifiable key facilities; all factors that will benefit the way finding of any users of a site. This difficulty in describing the 'needs' of a group called 'people with learning difficulties' is one of the reasons that cultural and heritage sites are advised to consult with individuals with learning difficulties to assess the effectiveness of their current and planned provision. (Deputy Prime Ministers office 2006, Rix 2005, Rayner 1998)

Most published guidance for cultural and heritage sites that relates to this population is in academic papers, or little known reports on small scale research projects,

or does not have people with learning difficulties and/or cultural and heritage sites as its primary focus. For example, *Access in Mind* (Rayner 1998) is an out of print report which discusses a range of projects that took place in the mid-1990s and the lessons that can be learned from them in relation to museum text labels, audio guides, video and IT, hands-on-sessions, publicity materials, visual arts and consultation; whilst *A Tips and Techniques Table* (California State Parks 2003) is designed for a diverse public which includes people with learning difficulties. Within available journals and academic reports not specifically related to cultural and heritage sites, there is evidence of the important role food plays in making people feel safe, comfortable and free to socialise in social contexts in which learning occurs (Bohata et al 2002). There is also evidence that people with learning difficulties find pictorial additions to signs beneficial and that pictograms, symbols and story-board style pictures are particularly useful (Lines et al 2004). This research suggests that everyday symbols should be used wherever possible and that sites need to consider how imagery could be used to help people in understanding text. They note too the importance of colour in signs and their use in way finding, but highlight the need for further research in all these areas.

Within research papers specifically focussed upon this population within the cultural and heritage context, Rix (2005) gives detailed suggestions for best practice in relation to audio tours, with the intention of providing a better starting point for creating and assessing provision. He identifies research-based approaches for: establishing the purpose and process of a visit or tour; maximising recall of information; making appropriate lexicon and grammatical choices; using referential material; and mitigating

against processing, response and auditory impairments. Blewitt (2004) mentions, in passing, the importance of touch, smell and sight to people with learning difficulties and that there is less need for verbal explanation in this context. A number of papers mention the need for accurate and comprehensive, accessible information, including in marketing, pre-visit information and on-site interpretative information. They note too the importance of the personal attitude of managers and staff and their lack of awareness of the needs of visitors with impairments and the simple things that would improve access (Goodall et al 2003, MENCAP 2003, Rix 2005, Hartley et al 2005). The tendency to see provision for this population as being in some way separate to the mainstream also needs to be confronted, requiring a commitment to supply resources equitably and as part of the general provision. (Goodall et al 2003, Hartley et al 2005).

Consulting with people with learning difficulties

Prior to the Access to Heritage Project in Liverpool and Merseyside within the United Kingdom, there had been no audits carried out by people with learning difficulties on the accessibility of cultural and heritage sites. The growing awareness amongst cultural and heritage sites that they need to remove barriers to access and engage with the whole of the community they serve is evident in the Inspiring Learning for All website (MLA 2004), where there are generalised statements about considering under-represented groups and different learning styles. However, people with learning difficulties are frequently sidelined. For example, in a 2004 report for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) it was noted that over 12000 students were involved in the research but that it was not 'appropriate' for

‘those from special schools to be asked to complete these forms’(Greenhill et al 2004) and that ‘some groups of pupils with Special Educational Needs did not complete forms as it was considered inappropriate’(p125). In the follow up report (Greenhill et al 2007), no mention of this issue was made though the same data was being drawn upon. From a social model perspective (Oliver 1983), this aspect of the research process would be seen as a barrier to participation.

A key response to marginalisation has been research programmes that reflect the interests, values and experiences of disabled people and have disabled people positioned at their heart. Emancipatory Disability Research focuses upon the need for research to be accountable and open throughout to a group run by disabled people, with the skills and knowledge of researchers being at the disposal of disabled people (Barnes 2003), aiming to produce accessible knowledge, using methods that are rigorous and place findings within their environmental and cultural context so as to highlight the disabling consequences of society (UKDPC 2003)

Inclusive Research by people with learning difficulties has developed from this emancipatory research model. Walmsley and Johnson (2003, p16) identify three core principles. “Research must address issues which really matter to people with learning difficulties, and which ultimately lead to improved lives for them”; “It must access and represent their views and experience”; and “People with learning difficulties need to be treated with respect by the research community.”

This latter point is one reason inclusive research requires ongoing self reflection. The process of conducting and reporting academic research by its nature tends not to be inclusive of people with learning difficulties, excluding them through complex written academic text and strongly theorised academic debate (Walmsley & Johnson 2003). Walmsley and Johnson identify self reflection as integral, both on the part of the participants and those from the wider research community working with them, who in particular ought to reflect on their position relative to others in the process. The risk is not only that the researcher's social skills and creativity, their identity, values and beliefs, become part of the equation influencing the findings (Ball 1990), it is also the relative ease with which those supporting the people with learning difficulties can come to dominate proceedings. As Traustadottir (2001) suggests, "If we are self-reflective within our research we will be less likely to run the risk of uncritically reproducing Othering or oppressions" (p26).

Aims of the research

The Access to Heritage Project, under the direction of the Heritage Forum, began in autumn 2005. The Forum identified three aims: To assist and encourage people with learning difficulties to access Merseyside's culture and heritage sites – as is their right; to enable heritage sites to learn from people with learning difficulties about how to best make themselves accessible to people with learning difficulties and therefore benefit everyone; and to create intellectual access guidance that can be used in heritage sites everywhere.

It is worth noting that members of the Forum felt strongly that the aims identified their 'right' to access sites, even though it was pointed out by others that this right did not exist

in law. The definition of heritage sites was also a broad brush term to facilitate the understanding of the participants. In the report to funders these sites were described as castles, galleries, museums, old ships, churches, palaces, old houses, but the Forum have also been involved with a wildflower centre.

Methods²

Establishing the Forum and its aims

This project identified and recorded the experiences of people with learning difficulties in a manner over which they had control, producing results to which they have access. It was run as much as possible on the basis of decisions made at meetings of the Heritage Forum, convened at different venues throughout Liverpool and Merseyside to facilitate member attendance. The Forum primarily came from five key community groups operating out of day service resource centres and a school. Attendance varied from three or four members to the full Forum, depending on time and place of the meeting. Twenty five people with learning difficulties were involved in the project from early 2006, along with a number of supporting staff. They have continued their work beyond this first access project.

In 2004, a project steering group was established to raise initial funds to employ the project co-ordinator and establish the Forum. It was evident that discussions were being dominated by people other than those with learning difficulties and so the steering group

² The members of the Forum, where they were based, the funders and sites visited are listed at the end of the paper.

disbanded when the Forum was established. The steering group members subsequently attended the Forum meetings as appropriate.

Since its formation, the Forum has been supported by a volunteer project leader, who created funding partnerships and links with local administrative network. A project co-ordinator (the second author) funded from grant income, facilitated meetings, visits and communications between participants, as well as helping to maintain a momentum for the project and the Forum. A number of gatekeeper personnel employed by cultural and heritage sites and local organizations attended the Forum meetings at different times. A volunteer academic researcher – the first author - provided support to the Forum, the project leader and project co-ordinator.

A key part of the project methodology has been the establishment of trust and respect between participants. During the first few meetings, people were encouraged to find out about each other and their individual interests. As multi-sensory activity is a valuable tool for people with learning difficulties, they also described which senses they preferred to use. At all Forum sessions, visual images played a key communication role. Symbols, photographs and drawings were used alongside the written and spoken word to facilitate the sharing and recording of ideas.

The Forum recognised that most of its members had little experience of cultural and heritage sites, and so were unsure about what to expect and how to engage with them.

Before final decisions were made about the form of the project people needed a number of visits to varying sites so that they could move beyond the novelty of the experience.

The original project aimed to assess the accessibility of the cultural and heritage sites, but a number of the gatekeeper personnel were eager for other possible activities to be considered. Across a number of meetings at different venues, so as to include all members, the Forum considered whether they would like to be involved in an arts based project, the original access project or an as yet undefined alternative. There was a strong consensus to continue with an evaluative access project.

It was decided that the Forum wished to consider the whole visitor experience at the cultural and heritage sites they visited. They wished to consider such things as: how they found out about a venue, how they got there and what happens when they got there; whether they felt welcome, how they found their way around and whether they could understand what it was all about; and whether the site was aimed at them and could hold their interest.

The arrangement of visits

The project co-ordinator made contact with sites selected by the Forum, to enable them to demonstrate their preparedness to engage with this population, and to deal with concerns about the use of photography and so forth. A member of staff was invited to meet with the group during the visit, to take advantage of insights that the visits engendered.

Each site visit typically involved about four people with learning difficulties from one or two of the groups who make up the Forum. The Forum soon settled on a routine that suited them best; arriving at a site at 11 o'clock, generally by taxi, then spending an hour going around the site (or often, part of the site), and onto the Café for a discussion and debrief. The feedback to the cultural and heritage sites was either given directly during these debriefing sessions or as an accessible written report.

The Forum also wished to take advantage of specific activities offered by cultural and heritage sites. They joined a hands-on workshop led by museum education staff, accompanied the guided tours available at several venues, and used audio tours that were on offer. The Forum was also invited to support the development of provision at St George's Hall. They made eighteen visits to the Hall, and were asked to advise the site designers on signage and other presentation issues. The Forum also raised additional funds to develop a temporary multi-sensory exhibition for St George's Hall in conjunction with artists, and to employ a film maker to record their work both in carrying out access audits and creating the exhibition.

Recording the Experience

In the early stages of their work, it was important for the Forum to identify how they could most effectively record their views on their visits to sites. The key factor was to capture their responses as close to the visitor experience as possible. Discussing issues in too much depth during a visit impeded the experience itself, and so meetings were held immediately following. This debriefing session took place either just before or during

lunch. This overlap between a business meeting and a social break often proved valuable, enhancing social cohesion, raising energy levels and encouraging broader and longer discussion.

A variety of tools were trialled to assist in the debriefing sessions. Video footage was recorded, but its systematic use and evaluation proved to be challenging and it was felt that additional expertise in film making or participatory video research was needed. Disposable cameras and digital cameras were also trialled, but the former did not provide images for use in debrief discussions, whilst equipment availability and lack of prior experience restricted use of the latter. Postcards of artefacts were obtained on occasion, too, proving of some value, but limiting discussion to predetermined items.

Following initial visits, the Forum identified the need for a post-tour questionnaire (see Figure 1) that would allow participants to note their experiences, their use of different senses and what they had and had not enjoyed.








<p>Liverpool Heritage Project</p> <p>Heritage forum questionnaire Today's date <input type="text"/></p> <p>Where did you visit? <input type="text"/></p> <p> Did you take pictures?</p> <p> or video?</p> <p>What senses did you use most today?</p> <p> Vision</p> <p> Hearing</p> <p> Touch</p> <p>Did you enjoy it?</p>	<p> </p> <p>Draw one thing that you remember most</p> <p><input type="text"/></p> <p>What did you like best?</p> <p><input type="text"/></p> <p>What didn't you like?</p> <p><input type="text"/></p> <p>Notes:</p>
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Figure 1: Post-tour questionnaire

The questionnaires were a valuable tool for discussion, allowing participants to express views through imagery and/or text, in the company of peers and support staff. These records did not form a typical research database, however. The majority of comments recorded on these sheets were the result of discussion with support staff who acted as scribes. The final words generally reflected the discussion which took place rather than a clear cut statement from an individual. Many of those involved in the research rely to a considerable degree upon visual cues and non-verbal communication approaches. For this reason, a comment such as Angela's "I don't like the dark, so I didn't watch the film" needs to be considered in the same context as a visual representation such as the one in Figure 2, which followed the hands-on session.



Figure 2: Visual notes taken during a debrief session

Such a representation could follow a series of short questions and single phrase answers, or a series of statements and physical gestures in response. This is one of the reasons that the co-ordinator identified the establishment of trust as a key precursor to the project. A trusting relationship between the support staff, project co-ordinator and the people with learning difficulties was essential if views were to be interpreted appropriately and given equal weight.

The Forum also wished support staff to raise issues based on their experience as advocates and therefore provided them with their own questionnaire, reducing the need to incorporate their views into the participant's questionnaires when supporting them. The project co-ordinator also took a participant-observer role during visits, being involved and responding to the actions and interests of the Forum members, but not directing their

focus. The project co-ordinator fed back questions that had arisen from her observations to the Forum during the debrief session. She also reflected on the experience with members of the Forum, the academic researcher and the project leader. Across more than fifty visits, the project co-ordinator reported gaining insight into the perspectives of the individual Forum members, as well as using her insight into the views of others to help compare and contrast perspectives during debriefing sessions. Again, the informality of this process needs to be underlined. The co-ordinator did not accompany individuals so that she could code their reactions to situations, or produce a diary of their experiences.

In drawing up their findings and recommendations, the Forum used a form of theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin 1998) in an ongoing, informal manner appropriate to the inclusive research process. The Forum recorded findings on a particular category until they recognised that they were repeating themselves, and no new relationships, properties or dimensions were emerging. Terms such as ‘theoretical saturation’, ‘properties’ and ‘dimensions’ were not used however; the first author encouraged the project co-ordinator to ‘keep on going until there is nothing more that anyone wants to say about something’. If an issue still lacked clarification, discussions and findings from previous visits would be used to frame questions on subsequent visits.

This research has aimed to be inclusive throughout. This written paper and the full reports to funders are the inaccessible outputs of the research. The Forum are identified as authors not because they have participated in this write up, but because it is their work which it supports. In writing this report the academic author is very aware that he cannot

provide the kinds of robust framework he would typically look for in an academic paper. Quotes cannot be provided, because those which are available to the academic author are not ‘meaningful’ enough, individually robust enough or reflective of how a view was constructed. There are no figures to be statistically analysed because they were not collected. They would not have been meaningful to the majority of the researchers. The findings recorded here come from discussions with the co-ordinator, with support staff and the Forum. These discussions have not been collated or coded in a manner which would exclude the Forum either. They have been recorded in visual format, accessible versions (see Figure 3) and presented to the Forum for feedback.



We should be able to use more of our senses.

We remember much more if we have been able to touch, smell, try costumes on and try things out for ourselves.

We enjoy people in costumes.

Figure 3: Accessible easy read presentation of findings

Comments have been fed back via the co-ordinator, support staff and directly in a discussion with Forum members. Just as trust was central to the process of research so it is essential to the reading of the research output.

Findings

The findings can be categorised under two main themes. First, relationships and ways of working: these findings apply to the personnel encountered at sites and how they are,

and can be, involved with these users (see Table 1a & 1b); second, provision design: these findings apply to the accessibility of the sites (see Table 2). We discuss the former in more detail as the latter – though of equal importance to the Forum - contains much which will seem familiar. In addition to these themes, there were three additional outcomes. The members of the Forum developed the view that a consultation process should be undertaken involving people with learning difficulties whenever new interpretation is designed and made for cultural and heritage sites. It was also evident how valuable it was for people to have their work recognised and showcased, particularly given that these users' ideas have for so long been neither recognised nor showcased. The Forum also felt people with learning difficulties should be supported to produce work of a high quality, not only to enhance the outcome of a project but also the motivation, trust and respect that underpin it.

Relationships and ways of working

People with learning difficulties do not usually have wide experiences of cultural and heritage sites and may not be aware of how to exploit their potential to the full. The Forum identified that it took up to ten visits for members to develop heritage site literacy, and that pre-visit information would help in this process. Few sites make links with people with learning difficulties and their service providers, or actively market available workshops to them. Perhaps as a result, they were unaware of what was available for them, free of charge, as part of the mainstream and programme specific provision.

Typically four hours was spent contacting sites, identifying the appropriate staff member and making arrangements. Often they seemed hesitant about working with the project, and gave the impression that they did not know what to expect when people with learning difficulties came to the site. After discussions with the project co-ordinator a number of site staff became enthused about visits, but this did not automatically permeate the workforce, however. The Forum generally did not feel welcomed on arrival at sites. Few members of staff chose to meet the Forum to discuss their experience of a site. Only three sites asked for Feedback. The co-ordinator reported that on many occasions staff said they would join the group and then did not turn up. Despite this, yet underlining the importance of people's attitudes, the Forum found that the best facilitator of access to a site is a tour guide who engages with people and builds on their current understanding.

Staff hesitancy did not surprise the Forum. Many people working in cultural and heritage sites have no experience of people with learning difficulties and are therefore uncertain about what to expect and what to do. Only first hand experience can teach staff that they have to do very little that is different or difficult. As a consequence, the Forum identified Disability Awareness training, involving people with learning difficulties, as a key issue for sites, so they can build up a range of staff with experience of involvement with this part of the community.

The Forum worked best in short bursts across a longer period of time. This provided flexibility for participants, and meant groups could focus on one contained aspect of a site during each visit. An ongoing relationship of regular visits over several months was

appropriate, enabling the delivery of information a number of times and in small chunks of no more than an hour. However, working with the designers at St George's Hall, demonstrated that Funders and heritage practitioners often choose to operate schedules that constrain an inclusive approach. For example, time limitations meant suggestions from the Forum could not be tested to assess whether they worked as intended.

Planning for longer time frames is a response to issues of concentration and the need to make sure people are understood. It is also a result of the ways in which the wider community often supports people with learning difficulties; for example, transport issues means that starting before 11am excludes many. Strong personal, trusting relationships also need to be built across of time, particularly given the key role played by social activities within the project. For instance, discussion within a site café was identified as both effective and appropriate largely because the break for food was understood by all Forum members to be an important social and refocusing opportunity.

**Table 1a - Findings and Recommendations of the Heritage Forum –
Working with Heritage Access Consultants**

<p>Venue attitudes & ethos</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A consultation process should be undertaken whenever new interpretation is designed & made for cultural & heritage sites. • Settings need to identify individuals responsible for initiating & responding to communication with this community of users. • Contacting sites about issues of access should not be a drawn out process. • Staff in settings often promise that they will accompany a group or join them for a discussion but do not turn up. This seems like bad manners, suggests that the people with learning difficulties are not important, & is very demotivating. Arrangements should be kept to...or false promises not made. • Sites should build up a range of staff with experience of working with these users. • When involving users in an access consultation, time scales need to be realistically planned. Most people with learning difficulties cannot be rushed. • People enjoy having their work recognised & showcased. • These users should be supported to produce work of high quality.
<p>Effective visits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All visit arrangements must be flexible to the individuals and/or their groups. • It is appropriate to focus on one contained aspect of a heritage site during each visit. • Attention tends to be kept for a maximum of one hour. • A break for food is important as a social & refocusing opportunity. • Starting a visit before 11am can cause problems with transport. • Transport issues will often cause problems for those attending. • A good pattern for a site visit is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One hour visit/workshop Short recall activity Lunch (with discussion) Longer recall activity • Discussions about a visit can take place within a site's Café & still be effective. • At least one member of staff should attend the post visit recall meeting.
<p>Uncertainties about working with people with learning difficulties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in all walks of life find that their views of effective practice are transformed by their involvement with people with learning difficulties. • When building a relationship with other organisations, such as funders, the involvement of people with learning difficulties breaks down barriers & motivates further engagement. • Many people working in cultural & heritage sites have no experience of people with learning difficulties & are uncertain about what to expect & what to do. Only first hand experience can teach staff that they have to do very little that is different or difficult. • Heritage site staff can be enthused about an upcoming visit by discussions with an advocate prior to the visit.

Forum members needed to be strong self-advocates at times and recognised the value of the project co-ordinator and other independent individuals to facilitate their advocacy. However, they felt strongly that priorities should be set by the people with learning difficulties, and that advocates should not be seen as the ‘access expert’ who could speak on their behalf. The project co-ordinator was aware that at times people wanted her to take on this role. For example, The Forum’s involvement with the designers of St George’s Hall was mostly conducted through her attendance at design meetings where she attempted to raise issues of access that had been identified by the Forum. The Forum felt that if others are supporting them or being supported by them they should attend shared, inclusive meetings.

Attendance levels at Forum meetings and site visits demonstrated that consistent supporter presence and engagement is a key factor in the continued involvement of people with learning difficulties. In assessing their impact, the supporters recognised the need to consistently reflect on whether the people with learning difficulties are directing the process or whether they are being directed. For example, supporters often wished or needed to leave at set times to fit in with other activities. At meetings, supporters or occasional visitors could dominate proceedings with relative ease. Providing supporters with their own voice within the process – such as through the support staff questionnaires - alleviated this pressure somewhat, as well as highlighting points around which the project co-ordinator could focus discussion.

This capability to dominate proceedings, despite having the best of intentions, was also evident when defining the aims of the project. The enthusiasm of people with learning difficulties for new experiences, and the pace at which they work, means that supporters/staff can easily direct a process with their own ideas, ways of working and/or ambitions without being aware of it. For example, in reflecting on their roles, the project co-ordinator and academic advisor both recognised how their interests may have influenced the project. The project co-ordinator was interested in tactile art experiences and under considerable time pressure at St George's the Forum chose to develop a multi sensory art work; whilst the academic advisor's original proposal for an access project had largely been followed subsequent to the Forum taking over from the original steering committee. Does this compromise the Forum's view that they wished to do this work, which they have carried it out in the manner of their choosing, and have gained a great deal from it? Does it compromise the supporters' view that working with the Forum had a transformative effect, changing their views of effective practice and breaking down barriers in a way which motivated further engagement?

**Table 1b - Findings and Recommendations of the Heritage Forum –
Working with Heritage Access Consultants**

<p>How should Cultural & heritage sites involve people with learning difficulties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It takes up to 10 visits for people to develop heritage site literacy. • These users have found it best to work in short bursts across a longer period of time. An ongoing relationship of regular visits across a period of several months is appropriate. • Users intending to carry out access audit projects need to be strong self-advocates and/or to have an independent individual to facilitate their advocacy. • Priorities should be set by the people with learning difficulties. • Advocates should not be seen as the ‘access expert’ who can speak on behalf of the people with learning difficulties. • Strong personal relationships need to be built between group members. Trust needs to be established across a period of time. • If others are arranging finances for the project or advising in any other way, they should attend meetings with the people with learning difficulties. • The enthusiasm of people with learning difficulties for new experiences, & the pace at which they work, means that supporters/staff can easily direct a process with their own ideas, ways of working and/or ambitions without being aware of it. • Supporters/staff must always constantly reflect on whether the people with learning difficulties are directing the process or whether they are being required to follow. • Having a social element to projects is beneficial for all involved. • Cultural & heritage sites need to provide individuals with the opportunity to assess proposed changes before they are finally implemented.
<p>Involving supporters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having consistent supporter presence & engagement is a key factor in the continued involvement of people with learning difficulties. • Supporters can easily dominate proceedings, despite having the best of intentions. • Providing supporters with a questionnaire allows them to raise issues based on their experience as advocates, issues sometimes not initially identified by the person with a learning disability. • Providing supporters with a voice reduces the incentive to incorporate their views into the participant’s questionnaires/feedback. • Supporters often wish/need to leave at set times (eg: straight after lunch) to fit in with other activities.
<p>Information gathering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People should be encouraged to explore different communication forms: pictures, symbols, signing, speech, written word, recorded word, audio, video, hands-on. • Views of individuals gathered in a variety of ways: visual questionnaires, observation, discussion in the moment, discussion retrospectively, drawing pictures & writing labels, brainstorming activities, taking photographs, recording with video, using postcards of artefacts, bring artefacts to individuals, workshops, regular meetings, discussion/interviews/questionnaires with supporters. • Digital cameras effectively allow for rapid recall & discussion. However, they present technical challenges, & raise issues of ownership. • Accompanying (but not leading) people with learning difficulties as they visit a heritage site provides invaluable insights & opportunities to explore their perspective. • It is valuable to involve a wide range of individuals with learning difficulties so as to get a fuller picture of access challenges & opportunities.

Provision Design

The Forum's findings in relation to enhancing site accessibility do not include any dramatic changes from everyday practices within most cultural and heritage sites (see table 2).

Table 2 - Findings and Recommendations of the Heritage Forum - Making Settings Accessible

<p>Providing additional opportunities for communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sites are most effective when more senses are being used.• More use of sound, not muffled & not too many sounds going on at once.• Audio text at the press of a button is well received.• Videos & music create a sense of place & reduce reliance upon reading text to access information.• Interactive computer games are popular.• Hands on exhibits create a very accessible space, but opportunities are currently limited.• Exhibits need to have strong contrast in colour & texture to be accessible to all.
<p>Strategies for effective signage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is a lack and/or inconsistent use of symbols in interpretation.• Most sites have unclear way finding.• There need to be clear, large, symbol-based signs.• Signs are needed for what can be done in different spaces (e.g. what to touch & what to sit on).• Colour coding for directions is helpful. Contrasting colours on floors & walls help to define a space.• Signs need to be clearly visible. The artefacts they relate to needs to be evident.• Signs should not be crowded, & should use large strongly contrasted fonts.• A simplified text identifying key information should be used with supporting symbols/pictures.
<p>People as effective resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The most effective access facilitator is a tour guide who engages with people & builds on their current understanding.• The use of costumes brings a space to life.• Providing simplified materials for guides within rooms would help both staff & visitors in discussing a site & its artefacts.
<p>Strategies to attract people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sites should tell people & their supporters about services available at their site, eg workshops.• Sites should proactively engage with these users, encouraging involvement in mainstream activities.• Pre-visit information would benefit this area of the community.
<p>Making people welcome</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• On arrival people with learning difficulties need to be made to feel welcome.• Disability awareness training is needed for staff, involving people with learning difficulties.• There needs to be plenty of seating available throughout a site.
<p>General factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People with learning difficulties do not usually have wide experience of cultural & heritage sites, & do not know what is available at venues to use them to their full potential.• It often needs lots of shorter visits for people with learning difficulties to get the most out of a venue.• Information is best delivered when it is given lots of times in small chunks.• A solution designed for some is also a solution for many others.

These findings focus upon the need for simplified texts, materials and designs, along with visual symbols, consistent and accessible way finding, sensory experiences, accessible technology, and guides (particularly in uniform). Of great significance to the Forum is their conviction that approaches to access that would benefit them would also benefit many others; for example, their recommendation that heritage site staff have access to simplified materials within rooms to help when discussing a site and its artefacts, and their recognition of the need for plenty of seating throughout a site.

Discussion

This project has emphasised the relevance of the studies identified earlier in the paper. It has shown that the need to involve people with learning difficulties in assessing provision within cultural and heritage sites can be met effectively if it is seen to be about creating a relationship across an extended period of time. It supports the need for improved signage and some of the proposed approaches to this issue (Deputy Prime Minister, 2006; Lines et al, 2004; Rayner, 1998). It emphasises the importance of the senses and has at its heart social activities involving food (Blewitt , 2004). It makes a clear case for sites to produce accessible information, including marketing, pre-visit information and on-site interpretation, and for them to challenge and enhance the personal attitudes and awareness of their staff (Goodall et al, 2003; MENCAP, 2003; Rix, 2005; Hartley et al, 2005). Perhaps most important of all it provides guidance about how to undergo this process of consultation.

The work of the forum underlines the relative ease of this inclusive approach and its manageable outcomes. It demonstrates that a commitment to supply resources equitably and as part of the general provision (Goodall et al, 2003; Hartley et al, 2005) need not be seen as a threat but as a reasonable, affordable and valuable opportunity which can provide benefits for all users. It encourages cultural and heritage sites to continue in their development of resources which allow people to explore through a diversity of communication channels:

Exhibitions must teach to different learning styles, respond to issues of cultural and gender equity, and offer multiple levels of information.(Majewski)

The informal research process also provides evidence that cultural and heritage sites can work with these users in ways with which they are already familiar. This may seem a fairly unremarkable finding. However, the central issue for people with learning difficulties is that they want to be made to feel welcome. It is all about people skills, yet when practitioners are asked about their views on working with people with learning difficulties they generally highlight the need for ‘new’ skills. Historically, educators have complained that they do not have the skills, experience or resources to effectively include people with learning difficulties (Allday, 2009). As a member of staff interviewed by

Allday states:

I think it is the toughest area museums have to deal with. There is hesitancy about working with such groups – partly out of ignorance of how to work with them. Exhibiting material generated by projects working with people with learning difficulties is far easier as you are employing other agencies who are specialists at working with people with learning difficulties. (Allday, 2009, p42)

The significance of this continuing attitudinal barrier was recognised in a paper prepared for the Heritage Lottery Fund in relation to excluded groups generally:

A resistance to change and an unwillingness to engage with social issues are the most powerful forces for inertia and present the biggest challenge to this assessment of sectoral need. (Sandell, 2002, p5)

The work of the Forum provides clear guidance for practitioners which demonstrates that they already have the skills to engage with people with learning difficulties. They just need to prioritise it. Once they engage they will find that they develop a more positive attitude (Avramidis et al, 2000; Mittler, 2000).

The importance of the personal is a significant outcome of this research. Much is made of the values of Universal Design and the development of technologies which facilitate multi-sensory experiences (Elliot, 2007) and the need for individual technical solutions to be effectively tested (Rix, 2005); however, even though technology was appreciated by the Forum, it was interaction with people who were welcoming, knowledgeable and responsive which created the greatest access to a site.

The individuality of people with learning difficulties is often greater than the stereotype of their label might lead cultural and heritage sites to believe. If sites wish to get a fuller picture of access challenges and opportunities they need to canvass a wide range of individuals who fall within this label. They need to consider too where they position these individuals. The Forum has had an impact, but from the margins. It was produced by a group operating outside of mainstream provision. Questions about how cultural and heritage sites can best attract the attention of this population need to be confronted; and how this can be achieved without simply calling upon day centres or

special schools or creating ring-fenced art projects. Perhaps most important of all sites need to question how they represent this integral part of the community.

Conclusion

This paper reports on an ongoing inclusive project undertaking an ongoing evaluative process. The Heritage Forum in Liverpool and Merseyside are intending to continue their work. Each site and each exhibition will present new challenges for users that can usefully be assessed by people with learning difficulties. The Forum believes they have an important role to play in meeting this need. They also wish for other groups to follow their example and to begin the process of evaluating the provision in their area. From the heritage site perspective this traditionally might have been seen as a threat, but given the changing culture of sites and the kinds of outcomes presented by the Forum, it can now be seen as an opportunity that is there for the taking.

The Heritage Forum

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The following thirteen sites around Liverpool and Merseyside were visited: The World Museum; The Walker Art Gallery; The Maritime Museum; The National Wildflower Centre; Speke Hall; The Williamson tunnels; Metropolitan Cathedral; The Anglican Cathedral; The Conservation centre; Lady Lever; Staircase House, Stockport; St George's Hall; Tate Liverpool.

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