Assessing informal learning: a case study using historical audio guides
Elizabeth FitzGerald

This paper presents the findings from a study that investigated how geolocated audio could be used to provide opportunities for public learning of history. The project, utilising mobile media and informal learning, was a collaboration between academic and community-based historians interested in enhancing public understanding of selected aspects of the history of Nottingham. It was concerned with supporting the enhancement of historical literacy, historical 'empathy', and participants' abilities to draw informed conclusions about contested historical subject matter. The historical subject matter was the 1831 Reform Riots in Nottingham, around which a local community history group designed a guided 'history walk'. The project supported a realisation of this walk and also gathered participant responses from both a 'people-led' walk and an alternative 'technology-led' version of the walk, where a media experience was delivered to participants through handheld devices that triggered the playing of audio files with information contained from different historical sources at specific locations of relevance to the Reform Riots around the city of Nottingham. Responses were recorded via a combination of methods: by questionnaires filled in immediately after each walk, researcher observations, and debriefing sessions of selected participants.

The audio tours were designed to enable public learning of historical events, through three interdependent aspects (see Figure 1 below):

1. Attaining historical literacy (i.e. learning basic facts about the Reform Riot: what happened in the period of the riot?)
2. Experiencing 'empathy' with historical subjects (i.e. what was this period and these events like for different people?)
3. Developing historical interpretation skills (i.e. responding to and evaluating accounts from a variety of perspectives: how were these events and their causes viewed from differing and/or conflicting perspectives?)
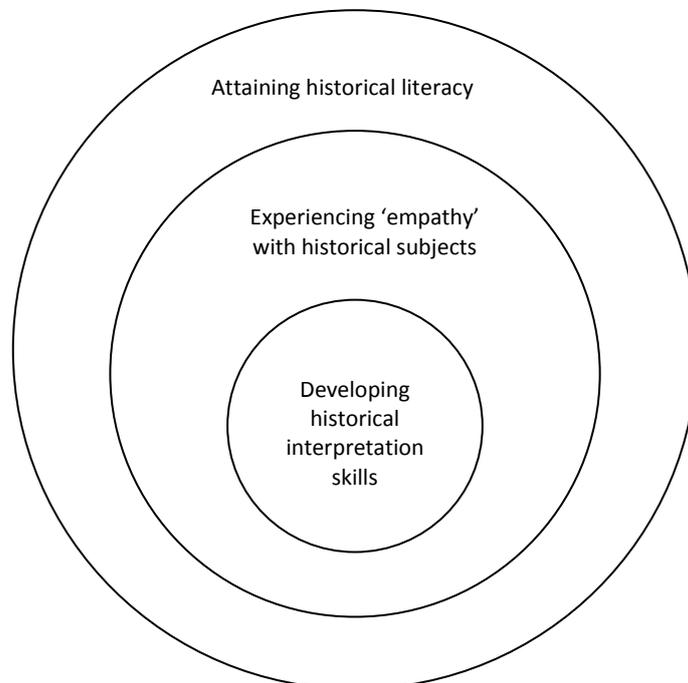

Figure 1: Model for representing aspects – or *objectives* – of historical learning

These three aspects – or objectives – are thought to be hierarchical, where the first objective (historical literacy) must be gained before the second (historical empathy) one can be achieved.

Historical interpretation, the third objective, can only be achieved once participants have experienced historical empathy.

This conference presentation will examine the extent to which participants in both walks showed evidence of having achieved these objectives, the value of having done so and also suggests how the objectives can be used in the design process of authoring similar experiences to enable informal learning to occur.