

Project name	Heritage Education Project
Location	Rotherham, South Yorkshire
Partner organisations	Clifton Park Museum. Rotherham
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Funded by	The Basic Skills Agency

Introduction

The project delivers museum workshops for adults on a variety of subjects, which are mapped to the adult literacy and provide an opportunity to improve literacy through museum activities, encourage adults to practice basic skills, and to take up an interest in local history.

Objectives

- Improve provision for people with basic skills needs in museums
- Generally demystify museums and involve new audiences who had not previously visited the museum.
- Develop museum activities which map to the adult curriculum.
- Build new links between museums and basic skills providers in the region.

Programme of work

Many people find the idea of going into a museum very intimidating or feel that a museum is not relevant to them. The project has been working with local basic skills providers and day care centres across the borough of Rotherham to organise taster workshops and longer courses at the colleges and centres themselves. The idea is to enable people to learn about local history and be involved in the interpretation of their own stories in a non-threatening environment, and at a level which was appropriate to them. The students then feel confident to come to further workshops organised outside their college, which enables them to meet others who are interested in local history too. Coming personally to the college to meet students with basic skills needs is the most effective and innovative way we inform people about the learning opportunities at the museum. However, we also produce publicity in a basic skills friendly way, something which has never been considered before at the museum, and keep a mailing list of past students, so that they can be sent the publicity directly to their homes.

Although our workshops are delivered in an informal way, the lesson plans specifically map the activities to the targets of the adult literacy curriculum at an appropriate level for the group. Students therefore have the chance to practice their literacy skills during the museum activities. Many are inspired to follow up the work they have been doing in class themselves, which leads to a greater desire for good literacy, and makes literacy skills a relevant and embedded part of the student's life. And during the sessions, students needing further help with basic skills can be identified, and provided with guidance on how to get more formal help from the local colleges, many of whom we work closely with.

An example of the way museum activities have been combined with basic skills is oral history training. Oral history is the interviewing and recording of people's memories onto cassette or minidisk. Oral history also powerfully ties in with the speaking and listening section of the Adult Literacy Curriculum. Targets range from answering familiar questions in an appropriate manner, to the higher levels such as following the gist of a long narrative, and making relevant contributions to move a discussion forward. While oral history is accessible, in that every student was able to produce a recording in their first session, the skills needed to be a good interviewer - shaping the interview, keeping the dialogue flowing, formulating a next question to follow on from the last answer - are all skills which meet the Speaking and Listening curriculum criteria.

Students at Rotherham Day Service made oral history recordings of their memories, and we explored how people lived in the past by beginning with our own memories, comparing the differences in people's memories, and then broadening the picture out to how people in general had done things in the past. Each week we took a different, accessible theme, such as holidays, home or play and used a combination of objects, photographs and pictures to discuss memories and learn about life in the past. Students also used their work to create an exhibition for the public library, and many attended other museum run workshops afterwards. The group also showed a noticeable increase in confidence and knowledge about what a museum did.

Outcomes

One effect of the project has been to make Clifton Park Museum more accessible to adults with basic skills needs. There are now workshops and resources available for adults with lower levels of literacy to learn about the museum.

The project has also developed a number of new learning materials, including computer games, a booklet, and a website, which are accessible to people with basic skills, and link museum activities to the literacy curriculum.

Staff awareness of basic skills in general has been greatly improved among museum, libraries and archives staff, both through basic skills awareness raising workshops, and the opportunity for these staff to teach to basic skills groups for the first time.

The museum is currently undergoing a redisplay, and when it reopens, the new exhibitions will certainly reflect the experiences and lessons learnt through this project. Adults with basic skills have also been involved in consultation for the redisplay.

There is a huge interest in Local History in Rotherham. This interest is an ideal way to encourage people to get involved in improving their basic skills, as well as providing that all important personal motivation to want to learn. People want to improve their reading and writing so that they can research their family history, or so that they can help put together a community exhibition with the museum.

Throughout my outreach work, I have not met a single student who was not interested in some aspect of local history, family history or the past in general. However, most students had never visited Clifton Park Museum, and most did not even know which

building the museum was, even though they had been to Clifton Park, where the museum is located! The Heritage Education Project has been about breaking down boundaries and getting more people involved in museums and libraries as a recreational activity which also addresses basic skills.

The approach of this project works because it targets the specific interests and motivations of people living in Rotherham, and offers a totally unique approach, both as a way to improve basic skills needs, and in the support it offers to people with low literacy levels who want to get involved in their local history.

The Heritage Education Project will be funded until March 2004. Future plans include the development of a website of teaching resources for other basic skills tutors, and ten week accredited courses developing the ideas for museum training and literacy that have already been explored.

By the end of the project, strong links between the museum and groups and individuals who have not previously been involved in museum activities will have been formed. The lessons learnt from the project will be fed into the Heritage lottery funded redisplay of Clifton Park Museum, due to reopen Autumn 2004. And hopefully the partnerships and potential between museums and Basic Skills provision developed by this project can be further cemented in the future.