

Intercultural Dialogues in Hungarian Museums

Summary

Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue (MAP for ID) was an international, two year project supported by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme. Hungary (led by the Foundation for Museums and Visitors), along with Italy, the UK, the Netherlands and Spain, was one of the five participating countries which piloted the use of museum spaces for encouraging intercultural dialogues.

Background

The project focused on helping museums to develop intercultural projects by:

- Identifying and sharing best practice.
- Supporting 25 pilot projects at local, regional and national level.
- Analysing and disseminating the outcomes of the 25 pilot projects through a final conference.
- Publishing a new *Handbook on Museums and Intercultural Dialogue*.

Challenge

The pilot projects were required to focus on the following areas: language learning in museums; interpretation and use of collections as bearers of diverse meanings; pluralistic approaches, introducing other perspectives and viewpoints; storytelling through the collection of life stories as intangible heritage; development of staff intercultural competences and skills.

All the pilot projects were supposed to involve participants in the planning process in order to establish a dialogue and to develop a project that addresses the needs of the participants.

Approach

Six projects were chosen; each using different approaches and exploring different interpretations of culture. The projects represented various types of institutions from all over Hungary (three from Budapest and three from the countryside). The Foundation also devised its own project in cooperation with the Hungarian Museum of Trade and Tourism.

Intended outcomes

To step out of the traditional 'teaching and preaching' role of the museum and become a listener instead.

Intended outputs

Each project intended to produce different things:

- Two exhibitions: one on graffiti and another on the collective punishment of Germans during WW2. This later one included a publication as well.
- A training programme (devised by the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest) for front-office staff which included language teaching and the discussion of cross-cultural issues.
- A series of discussions around different topics, most of them documented on film.
- Excursions, interviews and intercultural nights.

Obstacles and issues

Most of the project coordinators experienced how closely cultural relations were intertwined with personal identity. Therefore, the sensitivity of some issues meant that establishing trust with project participants took time. It was also hard to reach these different cultural groups and existing personal connections proved invaluable.



Sometimes the methods used in the pilot projects were not very creative and it was difficult to really embed the idea of dialogue as opposed to the presentation of information to new groups.

Actual outcomes

All the project coordinators and the groups they worked with saw a different face of the museum.

Actual outputs

The actual outputs exceeded original expectations:

- The graffiti exhibition tripled visitor numbers for the small local history museum that hosted it.
- The front-office staff training encouraged staff to appreciate and more confidently deal with visitors from different cultural backgrounds.
- The exhibition on the collective punishment of the Germans during WW2 has already been invited to museums abroad and booked for a year in advance. The project coordinator was invited to former camp sites in Ukraine to commemorate the victims and survivors, engaging this way in a wider intercultural dialogue.

Lessons learned

It requires courage on the part of

the museum to reach out to diverse audiences. Even attracting them to the museum is challenging, let alone involving them in generating content and co-curating exhibitions. All project participants have accepted the importance of dialogues instead of simple narratives and the fact that building trust takes time and needs sensitivity.

Next steps

Everyone would like to continue the work that has been started. Some already plan to turn their discussions into a regular club (Contactzone), one exhibition is on the road already, and another exhibition is being planned from the private collectors' treasures and stories. We also plan projects that are based on this kind of approach. We hope that all of them will find ways to incorporate what they have learnt into the everyday operation of their museum.

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Photographs: Graffiti – Balazs Maczo,
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Further information

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