

## Inside Out : a museum-based social inclusion project

If you go down to the woods today, you might see a bunch of youngsters wandering about apparently without purpose. It looks like a loosely-supervised youth centre outing.

You might be in for a bit of a surprise: it's a museum-based social inclusion project.

Wait - aren't museums supposed to be boring places that you go to, to get out of the rain? Well, just maybe they are places that can help young people understand cultural identity, appreciate stability, and discover insights into how humans relate to their environment.



### Segways and seals

Take the 'Nature Renewed' project for example, which involved half a dozen young people in care, aged between 12 and 19 - one of them in a residential home, the others having varied histories with foster carers. Through the [Norfolk county museums service](#) (NMAS) and the In Care Youth Council they were involved in a week-long programme of events exploring how the Norfolk countryside has changed as a consequence or cause of social change.

When I joined them they were geo-caching near the River Yare and in the process finding out how the woodlands are managed, how use of the river has changed, and how lanes have worn down and altered over centuries.

The previous day they had been exploring Thetford Forest on electric all-terrain [segways](#), which led to a discussion about the various ways in which the forest has been used. Before that, they had been out [seal-watching](#) off the North Sea coast.

The week began with the participants viewing a series of dioramas at [Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery](#), which represent recognisable Norfolk scenes. None of the dioramas features any human beings. One of them shows the

wildlife on the marshland near the coast at Blakeney, a village which has grown around a number of fishermen's cottages built from the local flint.

Visiting Blakeney themselves, the young people talked about the kinds of people who would have lived there in the past, their livelihoods based on fishing; and on the kinds of people who live there now. Discussion covered claims that less-affluent local people, who have looked after their local environment for centuries, have been priced out of their area abruptly.

The young people learned how previous generations of fishermen had regarded the seals as pests. They could appreciate how boat-owners now benefit from a tourist industry based on seal-watching from nearby Blakeney Point. There are insights here about human involvement in the changing environment, which were readily absorbed and discussed by the participants through the week. And their departure point was a museum display.

## Locating themselves

Another of the museum dioramas features a 'loke' – this is a regional term for a country lane enclosed on both sides by vegetation. Lokes would have been used heavily over the centuries, often marking parish boundaries, and might well have sunk gradually below the level of adjacent fields.

While I was there on the fourth day, two or three geo-caches were traced in lokes, and I was struck by the young people's appetite for knowledge about wildlife and landscape even while a series of treasure-hunting games was being played. I would have expected in a typical group of this age range that at least a few would have been busy trying to disrupt things; but these youngsters have had enough of disruption and seemed to be relishing the relaxed learning.

All the same, I found the ease with which they mastered global positioning technology too much of a contrast with the difficulties they have faced and will continue to face in locating themselves. Unlike their settled peers, they are ceaselessly navigating through many uncertainties.

In addition to showing unflustered ease with satellite technologies, the participants spent the week filming themselves and the environments they were exploring, participating in editing a DVD at the end of the week and demonstrating a visible sense of ownership over the museum space.

## Organisation and planning

[A recent evaluation](#) published in 2010 by Renaissance East of England illustrates the potentially enormous benefits of museum-based activities to young people looked after, in terms of confidence, self-knowledge and identity; social skills; cultural capital; and learning. The report argued that these benefits can be accessed quite reliably and sustainably, in most cases for considerably less than £30 per young person per hour.

In this light, the subtle excellence of the Nature Renewed project is worth dwelling on. It takes exceptional people working in partnership with other committed individuals, all well beyond the call of duty, to bend the managerial constraints and pull off this kind of programme. Norfolk is quietly developing a reputation for high quality museum learning projects with young people looked after. The benefits to the young people are almost tangible, but try telling that to the politicians and accountants.

Most of the participants had not met before the project, but it was striking how readily they talked among themselves about the experience of being looked after. Much of the time they feel so different to other youngsters and cannot share that experience, so these occasions are particularly valuable, liked cached treasure. It was a real privilege to listen in on a conversation about globalisation and capitalism as we took our lunch on benches in a church porch (in modest reference to the [Occupy London](#) protest outside St Paul's).

Museum learning consultant [Claire Adler](#), who collaborated with the museum service staff in designing the Nature Renewed project, pinpoints the key ingredients for its success: "organisation and planning, don't under-estimate it."

The preparation is obviously not trivial, in terms of risk assessment for instance, transport and timetabling. But once things are underway, I suspect that young people in care who are brought together in this way, maximise the benefits in ways that those from private households simply can't match.

Claire adds: "Over the whole week we kept them occupied, they clearly enjoyed themselves. There were no problems, and they enjoyed having the opportunity to talk to each other on the bus, a chance to define themselves. Having enough adults is important, and it was a great advantage having an environmental expert on the team, who dropped little gems of knowledge into the conversation."

## Stability and value

Two messages strike me from my observation of museum-based projects with young people looked after.

The first is the need to appreciate the importance of *stability*. Museums represent cultural stability while interpreting change, offering an inclusive sense of permission to reflect on what that means. Most of the young people I have spoken to in these projects tap into this opportunity directly, and sometimes the effect can be very powerful. In one project there was celebration among staff and volunteers when a young girl, known to be selectively mute, started speaking about what she was doing. Such moments owe a great deal to the skilful sensitivity of those involved.

There's also a demonstrable economic value to society which it is profligate for policymakers to ignore. The costs of not addressing these young people's needs can be very high. The research found the outcomes to be consistently obtained and lasting. These projects are low risk and inexpensive. More please.

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