UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

School of History

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Producing displays and exhibitions

Have you ever stood in a museum or an art gallery and watched how people interact with the displays? Very few people walk slowly from one display board, case of artefacts or painting to the next one in the line, and then the next, and so on. Some have not even come through the door, even though there may be items there that would be of interest to them. So how do you ensure as many people as possible will see your material?

Display boards, exhibitions and festivals are popular ways of informing people of your findings, and can be an effective way of communicating to a large audience, but to reach the widest audience and ensure they understand your material there are several things you should consider BEFORE you start designing your display. By taking a little time to step back and think about how different people absorb new information, you will be able to convey your key messages in a range of styles that will reach a far wider audience, and have more people enthusing about your project's findings. This guide will briefly describe the most common learning styles and help you to apply that knowledge to create really effective displays.

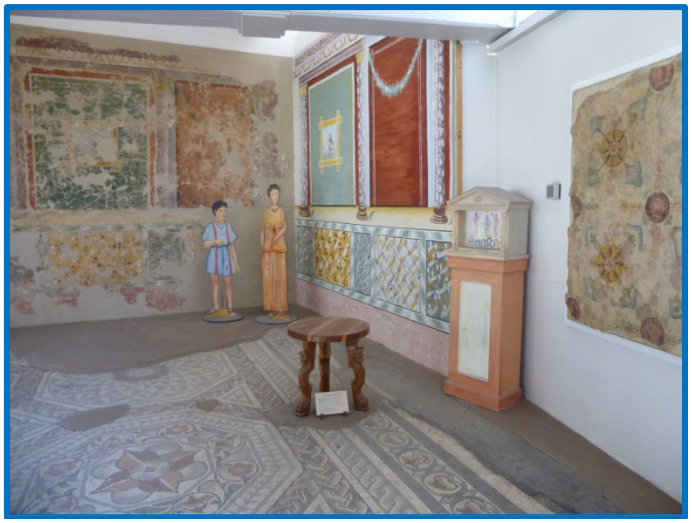
Theories of learning

The traditional way to impart knowledge is to break down the information into incremental chunks, with each piece a little more complex than the last, and to feed people that information one stage at a time, gradually moving from the simplest ideas to the most difficult. Learning is treated as a passive process - Dickens likened it to seeing people as empty vessels, waiting to have knowledge poured into them. We have probably all experienced that form of teaching and learning, and for some topics it can be the most appropriate approach – for example, it is necessary to have a base level of knowledge before trying to understand quantum mechanics.

The equivalent in the context of a history or heritage display would be a series of panels containing information that builds on the content of the previous panel, for example through a chronological story. There may be valid reasons for presenting your information that way, but if you adopt that format and nothing else, it is unlikely that your key messages will be seen by all of your visitors. People may move between your panels in a seemingly random order for many different reasons: something on a later panel may have attracted their attention; they may have seen someone they want to speak to on the other side of the room; or there may be too many people standing round the next panel. There is nothing wrong with presenting information in chronological order, and indeed it can be helpful, but you need to bear in mind that not every visitor will read every word on every panel and in the right order.

The information in each of the first three panels here is self-contained, but the header for the final two panels clearly links them, to try to ensure people will read them both together.

The constructivist theory of learning says that people will construct their own meaning in the light of a series of individual variables, such as their existing knowledge, beliefs, cultural background, age or educational level. Learning is an active process, and information is not simply absorbed, but is fed into a pre-existing matrix of information that is already in the person's mind, that helps them to make sense of the new facts. The constructivist theory explains why different people can often interpret the same information in different ways. Understanding this will enable you to think about your display in a range of different ways, to try to see what background information you need to provide to ensure your material is understood correctly.



Children's experience of rectangular objects raised off the floor in houses may lead them to believe that this shrine in the home of a Roman family is a television set.

Styles of learning

Different people prefer to absorb information in different ways, for example by reading a book, by listening to a lecture, through interactive discussion or by trying things out to see what works. If you can create a display that presents its material in a number of different ways, your message will be absorbed by a greater proportion of your visitors.

Four of the most common learning styles are set out below, with ideas about how to create an effective display that will engage people with each of these natural preferences:

Preferred learning style	Meeting those needs
Visual-spatial	include maps, diagrams and pictures
Linguistic	include written words and/or spoken text
Kinaesthetic	include objects to touch and activities that people can do
Musical	include music and poetry

Designing your display

The key to designing an effective display is to start with some questions, and let the design flow from the answers, and not to start by thinking 'we need some display panels, now what shall we put on them?' The following questions are important, but others may also be pertinent to your topic:

- Who is in your target audience?
- Does it include children (and if so, how old are they)?
- Who else will visit?
- How much will they know about the topic?
- What are your key messages?

- How can you relate those to their experiences and make it relevant to them?
- What display media will help you to deliver your key messages to your visitors?
- How will you accommodate different learning styles to ensure those key messages are understood?
- How will the material be arranged (e.g. chronologically, thematically)?
- What objects, documents or other resources will you also use to tell the story?

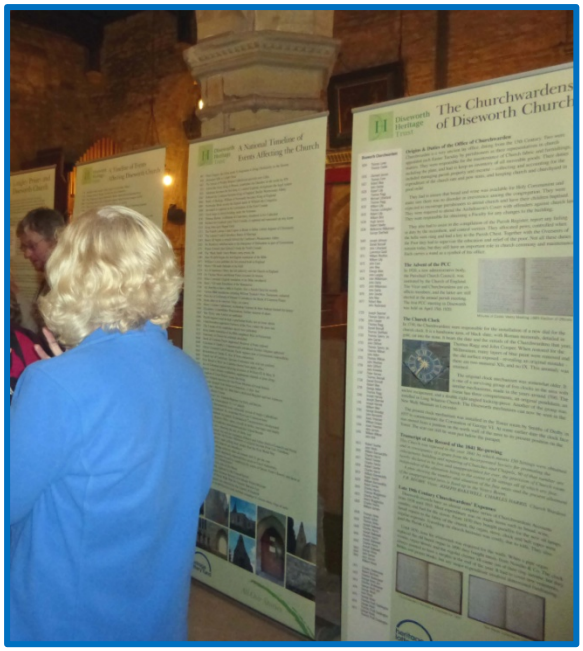
Special considerations for young audiences (but also relevant to other groups)

- Don't include too much text – your visitors may not have the skills or desire to engage with this, and it can turn your material into a (potentially boring) literacy exercise. The adage 'a picture is worth a thousand words' holds true for any audience.
- Relate your content to something from contemporary life.
- Most children (and many adults) are kinaesthetic learners. Make sure you include things they can touch and activities they can do.

For most community groups with a limited budget, the three most common forms of display media are permanent printed boards, posters or other material mounted on display boards, and pull-up display panels.

Medium	Advantages	Disadvantages
Permanent printed boards	• Look professional • Long-lasting	• Expensive to change • Bulky to store • Heavy and bulky to transport
Posters or other material mounted on folding boards	• Lighter to carry than permanent boards • Long-lasting, provided the posters are laminated • Flexible – cheap and simple to change the content • Ideal for history fairs, where you might be given a table-top for a display	• Need to purchase a set of boards • Need something to stand them on, unless you can afford double-height boards • Posters must be laminated for durability
Pull-up display panels	• Easy to transport • Look more professional than posters	• Can't be changed • Can damage easily • Can topple if you are outdoors

Posters are inexpensive



Panels look professional, but can topple outdoors

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Case Study: The Holocaust Centre

THE JOURNEY lies at the heart of the permanent exhibitions in the Holocaust Centre, Nottinghamshire. Introducing this important but potentially distressing topic to children of primary-school age, while remaining true to the memories of survivors, presented a challenge.

Target audience: Primary school children, their teachers and Holocaust survivors

Key messages: The history of the Holocaust, with focus on survivor experiences and testimony, encouraging children to think about prejudice.

Creating relevance: Journeys children have made, and their experiences of bullying and prejudice.

Accommodating learning styles: photographs, objects, environment, written and spoken word.

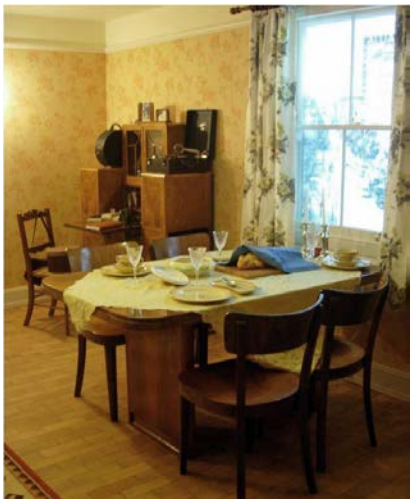
Display media: Video, oral histories, soundscapes, room settings, replica objects, documents, labels, interactive computers, audio tour.

Visitors start by watching a short video about journeys, encouraging them to think of journeys they have made, for example, to see relatives, or on holiday. It is then explained that not every journey is a happy one, and some people are forced to make unpleasant journeys.

Visitors then move back from the present by going through room settings. These include a 1930s classroom and a 1930s dining room, where the window shows a typical street scene and where the table is laid for a meal with objects that the visitors may touch. Their senses are heightened by being taken into a hiding place, where they have to keep quiet, and by being able to listen to recordings of the childhood memories of holocaust survivors.

The focus is on the choices families had to make, on the *kindertransports* and the experience of the refugees who settled in the UK – the circumstances leading up to their departure, what it was like to leave their home and family members behind, and their arrival in Britain. Children are encouraged to think about the survivors' experiences in terms of prejudice, bullying and exclusion – themes they will understand, and lessons they can learn and will remember for life.

THE JOURNEY starts by explaining that not every journey is a happy one.



Room sets, such as this 1930s dining room, hel visitors to imagine whc it was like to live throu the events that are bei described. Visitors are able to handle the iten on the table and to sit the chairs, while anything precious can locked away safely in t cabinet.