

Written by **Chris Whitehead**,
Professor of Museology, Newcastle University.

Co-production:

Co-production can be defined as a 'process of producing some form or aspect of cultural heritage [that is] deliberately shared/distributed beyond the usual institutional players'



Remember:

While Co-Production work is stimulating it is also challenging – it isn't always the right solution or the quickest or most practical approach!



A common impulse in engaging with migration is to work with stakeholder communities to 'co-produce' displays. This ensures that non-official voices can be heard and can give a number of benefits to the communities involved, such as providing new skills and fostering a sense of participation and official representation. Co-production is also a way of avoiding the liabilities of the museum speaking for others, through a process of speaking with communities.

Co-Production is used in the museum for a number of purposes, including to:

- **challenge** the conventional balance of power
- **broaden** bases of representation or expertise
- **introduce** new voices and new knowledge
- **develop** relevance to stakeholders
- **provide** new forms of engagement for different communities
- **provide** new forms of interpretation and resources for visitors
- **democratise** heritage and enable greater inclusivity.

Inviting non-professional stakeholders such as people with migrant backgrounds into the museum and into the display production process can be beneficial for museum professionals too. It often provides deep insight into the experiences, ways of thinking, internal diversity and community dynamics of stakeholder groups. It can jolt us out of comfortable approaches and normal ways of doing things in museums. For the same reasons, it can be an intense and challenging process and requires careful planning and engagement.

Critical issues in Co-Production

Here are six critical issues to consider when planning any Co-Production activity:

- 1.** Society is so plural, diverse and dynamic that the museum can never claim to representational completeness. You cannot represent all of the experiences, viewpoints and attitudes in society. In selecting a group or groups to work with you make choices about who to represent. Sometimes groups that you don't select react angrily.
- 2.** By engaging with a discrete group you might inadvertently help to constitute it and 'other' it. This is part of the paradox of inclusive practice!
- 3.** Some stakeholders become 'go-to' groups for museums and effectively become semi-professionalised and so used to working with museums that they become 'accomplished spokespeople'. This can mask tensions within communities about the rights of a small number of individuals to represent larger groups.
- 4.** Using multiple voices in an exhibition or display can be misleading. You may want to give them equal prominence, or emphasise voices from marginalised groups. But this can have the unintended effect of presenting a 'choral' idea of harmonious society where everybody's voice can be heard easily. This means that the disadvantages and inequalities that some people suffer from can seem to disappear in the museum.
- 5.** Many co-production projects privilege minority voices at the expense of majority ones. This can lead to majority groups feeling excluded and under-represented in the museum, even if the underlying aim is to educate majority groups about minorities to increase social cohesion and empathy. Some majority voices can be defensive, or aggressively conservative and not likely to foster cohesion.
- 6.** Some groups are not easy to engage with. Their members may have views or cultural practices that are offensive to other communities, including majority communities. In some cases this has legal dimensions in relation to public order that need to be considered. This leads to the moderating and sometimes silencing of different voices, and dosing the amount of agency, authority and responsibility that non-professional co-producers are given. This may seem contrary to the spirit of co-production, but is an inevitable part of it.

These issues do not mean that we should abandon co-production, but rather that we should be aware of its limits and risks as well as its benefits. Our Co-Production mapping exercise will help you to think these through in advance of commencing a co-production project. Our Display Production Parameters exercise suggests alternative ways of responsibly engaging with social issues around migration in displays.

Both exercises are coming soon to the THINK?NG THROUGH MIGRATION toolkit.