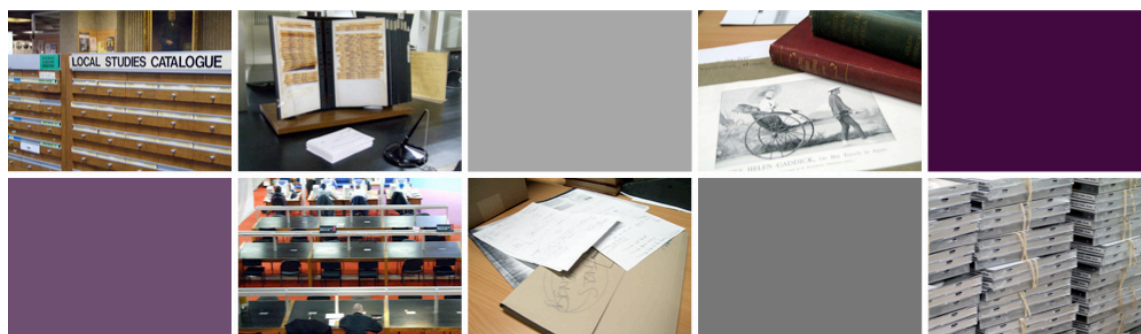


CONNECTINGHISTORIES

Guide

How to Create a Learning Package



If you are based in the West Midlands, or elsewhere, and you want to do some research as an individual, with a group of students, as part of a local history group, or maybe as a researcher as part of a heritage project, the following pages are intended to help. Where do you start? What questions are helpful to ask? What issues do you need to be aware of as a researcher? How can you present what you discover? How can you get other people involved? How can you create your own *learning package*?

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Introduction

Learning about the past is vital to our understanding of the present.

Learning packages can present information to the wider public, engaging a range of audiences in a range of forms. They can be website pages, exhibition panels, information booklets, guideline leaflets, photographic displays, illustrated essays, audio and video displays, or whatever medium is most appropriate to your ideas. But however large or small the project, and whatever its format, creating a *learning package* will involve key elements: thinking creatively, spending time doing research, considering audience needs, asking advice and presenting findings effectively.

Many considerations go into the production of a website like *Connecting Histories*. For example, the research for *Campaigning for Social Justice, Migration and Settlement* and *Performing Resistance* took two research officers twenty four months to investigate, compile, edit, discuss and illustrate. The wider process involved a consultation period and collaboration between a team of five archivists, two outreach officers, two academic advisors, an advisory board of heritage experts and one project leader!

This *learning package* is intended to give an introduction to the process of doing research and writing a *learning package*.

To focus more closely on the issues it can involve, it will also show the development of the *city stories* exhibition, *Questions of Travel*, a small *learning package* that foregrounds the legacy of two important 19th century travellers and photographers from Birmingham, Sir Benjamin Stone and Miss Helen Caddick. You may look at the exhibition first and then return to these pages to see how it was created. This section is therefore designed for the general user to:

- Take you through some of the creative processes that went into *Connecting Histories*.
- Highlight issues about 'research' for general users, teachers, archivists, students and heritage groups.
- Give some useful suggestions about how to present information to others.
- Show how the *Questions of Travel* city story exhibition was created.

These suggestions will only be a guide based on our experience. Ultimately however, there is no right or wrong way to go about research. Learning about history and culture is a personal journey and should be an enjoyable and enriching experience at any level. So show your passion, creativity and bring your subject to life!

Choosing Topics

Finding Inspiration

Choosing your topic and writing a *learning package* will depend upon a whole range of factors. One thing is certain: worthwhile learning takes enthusiasm, patience, time and an open mind. Remember that your *ideas* can make a difference! Learning more about how history, society and culture is woven into our everyday life is an enlightening process. Try to choose a topic that will take you and your audience on a journey, raise questions and open new perspectives. From the very start of any learning journey it is absolutely crucial to talk to others. Ask for advice, make contacts, e-mail people, chat, find help and get others involved.

Ideas for research can come from many directions: conversations, reading matter, art, family histories, social events, buildings in the street, random curiosity, radio programs, websites, or perhaps from a strong sense of political commitment to social justice, class values, racial equality, gender rights. Although it is a large and multilayered website, the underlying ideas behind the *Connecting Histories* project emerged from some simple but important issues: how has a city such as Birmingham developed over time? What different people have lived here? What shared experiences exist between so many different communities? And how important is it to renew a sense of 'social justice'?

Imagining *Questions of Travel*

The idea behind the *Questions of Travel* exhibition was inspired by a painting that hangs in the Local Studies and History collection of Birmingham Central Library on floor 6. The idea for a *learning package* was born from a sense of curiosity about the large Victorian portrait of a gentleman standing next to a world globe: Sir Benjamin Stone. A brief *learning package* was imagined to uncover the context of this painting. What was Stone's relationship to Birmingham, the library, and the rest of the world?

Birmingham today is a culturally diverse city. The *Connecting Histories* website contained an exhibition page called *city stories* aiming to give introductions on less well known aspects of Birmingham's past. This section offered one way of presenting a *learning package* on someone like Stone. Would Benjamin Stone's life and painting link back to the themes that were central to the rest of the website, such as 'social justice' or 'migration and settlement'?

Starting to Locate Resources

Once you have a rough idea for your project, you need to know what materials may be available. To do a *learning package*, you will need to find some historical sources on your chosen subject. In the case of the *Questions of Travel* exhibition, getting some initial biographical information and an initial sense of what *collections* were available was vital, if an exhibition was going to be possible. So who was Sir Benjamin Stone and what archives or collections were available at Birmingham Central Library? This was quickly assessed by:

1. consulting biographical sources (*DNB*; '*Local Obituaries*'; *Websites*)
2. establishing the archive sources on Stone.

This meant visiting the City Archives and Local Studies and History, consulting staff, checking library catalogues and consulting an old fashioned 'card index' to the Benjamin Stone 'Photographic Collection'.

At this early stage, a number of things had become clear: Stone was an important 19th century pioneer of photography and travel whose reputation was local and national. His life was linked to key issues of how to 'represent' places, landscapes, and people. Meanwhile, the Birmingham Central Library was discovered to hold a massive collection of photographs which could be accessed, researched, and explored through microfilm. The ideas for an exhibition theme were now starting to emerge: 'how did Birmingham experience the world through the photographic images taken by Sir Benjamin Stone'. However, this would need much more work and thought to develop. Some short working titles were considered, such as 'The Pleasures of Travel' 'Questions of Travel', 'Birmingham Photography and Education' and 'Exploring the Empire'.

Think: Audience

Who is the audience and what are their needs?

If you are simply conducting learning for your own needs and pleasure, then how long your learning project takes and what form it finally assumes will largely be left up to you. It may be that a short collection of notes may satisfy you, or it may take a 5,000 word academic essay. You could create an illustrated sketchbook of findings, or produce a piece of art in response to your study.

However, if you are doing research with the aim of sharing it with others, then the type of research you do, the level of detail you need, the amount of time it takes to write and present, the type of language you use to show your findings are all dependent on a sense of your audience's needs. What issues are important, topical, or sensitive to the community you hope to get interested in your work? Think carefully about this issue.

The *Questions of Travel* exhibition was created with several possible audiences in mind. The first idea was to give illustrated information on the life of Benjamin Stone in terms of website pages for a general user with an interest in Birmingham history. Other potential users included those with an interest in how different cultures have been historically represented. Another was those with a specific interest in photography. These issues all affected the way the information was researched and developed, and presented. Below are some further considerations to take into account for different audiences:

Website Audiences

If you are writing a website for a general audience interested, for example, in Birmingham history then it will need to be interesting and clearly written, presented with visual images and clear examples. Some people argue that people read very little actual 'text' on websites. If so, then there is little point in placing huge blocks of information on a page and expecting people to plough through what you have researched. Make sure you use plain English wherever possible and create clear links to help people navigate between materials. Think about wider access: is the website open for people with disabilities?

A website will often organically evolve and take on its own qualities. If you want people to revisit a more detailed website, then there needs to be enough materials for an audience to come back and explore what you have found out over numerous occasions. The *Connecting Histories* website contains more information than many websites, but then it was designed to appeal to both students and general users in the long term. It was designed to create discussion and promote further learning by others. The *Questions of Travel* exhibition also contains much information, but a limit of about ten pages was decided on.

Public Exhibition Audiences

If you are creating a public exhibition such as you often see displayed in libraries and museums, various additional factors need to be considered. First of all, the stark fact is that most people will not have much time to spend looking at your work. An exhibition will need to be visually striking and concise to make people stop and learn. An audio installation will need realistic lengths of recordings. Give clear headings to each section to guide people along. Organise the information clearly. The information it contains will need to hold unexpected surprises to keep people's attention. The best public exhibitions often tell a story that takes the audience on a long journey in a very short space of time.

School Learning Packs

If you are creating a resource to be used in schools, then you will need to place more emphasis on presenting facts, dates and details in a direct and accessible form which students will find useful to revise. At the same time, you need to make history relevant to the present day and bring history alive in ways that students will respond to. This means being direct and being imaginative and getting students involved. Be clear on what parts of the curriculum or 'Key stage' you are targeting, whether younger or older children. Think about activities that children can get involved in.

Doing Research

Mapping Collections

One of the first important realisations about research is understanding how much time it takes. One day's work in a library will not be enough to do your research. If you are working to a deadline you need to set realistic targets which will involve finding materials, reading, making notes, drafting your ideas and often returning to find more information from libraries and archives collections when necessary. Using archive sources can be particularly time demanding. A leaflet on using archives can be downloaded from connecting histories *guidance* section.

When doing research it is a good idea to try 'mapping' as many collections as possible that are relevant to your project, drawing in resources from as many sources and perspectives as possible. This means going to a library, assessing what information is available, creating an extended 'list of resources' that you will be using (including on-line materials). Later, you could make this list accessible to others in your *learning package*. If you are very lucky, you may uncover some new information that opens up new perspectives on your topic. However, most of the time, doing research involves reinterpreting existing information for you (and your audience's) own needs.

In terms of the *Questions of Travel* exhibition, a vital aspect of the research involved trying to find ways of exploring the Benjamin Stone photographic archive itself. This contains literally thousands of photographs which are accessed by an old fashioned card index system rather than a more modern online catalogue. This meant there was only time to view a small proportion of this massive collection. It was essential to be selective in looking for dramatic provocative images that linked Birmingham to the rest of the world and which opened up significant questions about race and culture.

Background Reading / Gaining Critical Awareness

After 'mapping' useful collections, you will need to get down to some background reading to help you gain a 'critical awareness' and find out what other research has already been done on your topic. Are there any books giving a history of your subject? Are there any academic texts giving specialist readings? Journal articles? Encyclopaedia entries? Exhibition publications? Gaining a critical awareness means weighing up the available evidence and arguments. This is vital to the success of your *learning package*, but it will be demanding and take time. Some libraries contain huge amounts of reading matter, and of course you will need to discover where the appropriate subject area is housed. However, if there is nothing in your local library, should you arrange a visit to a local university library, or perhaps the British Library in London? [online at <http://www.bl.uk>]

Getting some advice from others to help direct you to shortcuts - or give you 'word of mouth' knowledge at this stage is essential. Do not try to 'reinvent the wheel'. For the *Questions of Travel* exhibition, the Head of Birmingham's Photographic Collections, Pete James, was very helpful in getting a sense of what useful reading material on Stone was available, contemporary and relevant. With this help, two sources of information became central to the development of the project: Edwards, James, Barnes, *A Record of England: Sir Benjamin Stone and The National Photographic Association 1897-1910* [V&A Publications, 2007] and Sandra Courtman, *A Journey Through the Imperial Gaze: Birmingham's Photographic Collections and its Caribbean Nexus*, Ramamurthy, Anandi and Faulkner, Simon, eds. *Visual Culture and Decolonisation in Britain* (Ashgate, 2006).

Research Problems and Solutions

To begin with, your critical reading may be a slow and frustrating affair. Stick with it. Research skills involve lots of trial and error. The more time you spend in a library and the better you get to know what it contains, the more your knowledge and project will grow. Be prepared that academic books will be written in technical styles and that libraries such as Birmingham Central often carry texts dating back to the 19th century, written through perspectives that can hinder as well as help. Get the help of library staff and always be very polite to them!

In terms of your developing project, try to keep stepping back from what you are doing and ask yourself - is the focus too narrow or too broad? Is there too little information available to really make your project work? Has too much already been written on the subject? Is it just not interesting enough? Why is it so important that other people need to know about your research? How will it help others? Do you need to cut something out of your project, or bring another element in? Before things get set in stone, be ready to improvise and take chances.

Research problems can often lead to new possibilities. For example, one research 'problem' that occurred in *Questions of Travel* took a positive form. Doing research on Stone began to reveal another important source of photography by a less well known late 19th century traveller from Birmingham: Miss Helen Caddick. There are twelve volumes of Caddick's diaries available at Birmingham Central Library, containing photographs and descriptions of Africa, Asia, Japan, America, the West Indies etc. At this stage a serious decision was needed. Should *Questions of Travel* include Helen Caddick as well as Benjamin Stone? Look at the final product in *city stories*: do you think the final balance works or is it confusing?

Changing the course of your project can be make or break. It will either send you down the wrong path, or unlock the missing piece that brings your whole project alive. Get advice and then take a calculated risk. There is no final right or wrong answer to research.

Making Notes

Create your own Archive

The idea of 'making notes' while doing research seems obvious enough. You need to keep a record of all the important pieces of information you have discovered - your notes, photocopies, photographs, journals, books, records, etc.

Creating your own archive of gathered knowledge is an important practical and creative task. Use a filing or folder system which works best for you. Alphabetical systems can order and store your notes for easy recall (Caddick, Helen; Stone, Benjamin). Or you could use theme trees: Birmingham Photographers (men); Birmingham Photographers (women). However, the more information you gather, the more you may need to use detailed sub-categories for your notes, such as 'Benjamin Stone and Africa'; 'Helen Caddick in the Middle East'. This will help you retrieve information more easily instead of being lost in a room with mountainous piles of menacing random papers.

Creative problem solving

But making notes during research is also about playing with ideas. It means keeping a track of your thoughts, ideas, contacts, impressions and emotions as they unfold (often spontaneously) through your work. These are often vital when you are putting together the texts for your exhibition or *learning package*. Constantly sketching out rough ideas and drawing bubble charts and flow diagrams can help you hone your project into shape. It enables you to visualise the real direction and substance of your intended *learning package*, work out solutions to crucial problems, and create clear sections for your work.

Creative note taking, sketch charts, maps and flow diagrams were vital in both recording the research needed to form the subject matter of *Questions of Travel* as well as in coming up with the final 'structure' of the exhibition. It was only when the notes on Benjamin Stone and notes on Helen Caddick were brought together that the close connections and contrast between the two people became clear. Looking again at the basic facts (ie. both photographers from Birmingham, working around the late 19th century, whose work now forms important historical collections in Birmingham Central Library) and reviewing the critical readings that had been done, the basic ideas were sketched and re-sketched out to draw the strands of the project together more closely.

Further Suggestions on Making Notes

- Answers to problems come at any moment at any place at any time: always keep a pen and notepad handy.
- Never, ever, enter a library without pencil and paper.
- Write down ideas as they come to you.
- Sketch out overviews of what information will fit in each section of your *learning package*.
- Always write down the library reference and location numbers of books.
- Always record the publisher, year, author and page numbers you've used.
- Use notes to see links between different subjects.
- Draw a large map of your learning unit to help visualise what will go where.
- If you find out some interesting information that does not fit your project, make a note. It could start your next project.
- Start your own personal library of photocopies, notes, reference numbers, interesting facts, and vital information.
- Keep going back over the notes you have already made to see new perspectives on what you have been learning.

Presenting Information

Being Clear and Concise

Presenting information to others involves a number of vital challenges. If your research has gone well, you may find that you have amassed a very considerable amount of information. However, it may only be a small portion of this information that forms the final layout of the *learning package*. You need to present your information practically, clearly, concisely. You must balance enthusiasm with a sense of critical awareness. Better to present only one aspect of the research area you have covered effectively, than to take on too much and create a confusing set of ideas, questions and images.

You cannot expect to swamp the audience with too much information and expect them to be interested. At the same time, you need to create enough detail so that people will want to look at your work more than once. How do you decide what to present and what to cut out of your final draft? How much text do you need and how many images? Is there a clear overall structure to your *learning package* that can simply be followed by the audience? Is it written in a plain language? Does it avoid obscure terms (or explain them if necessary)? Is it free from academic jargon? Does your *learning package* entice an audience into your company? Does it inspire?

There are no hard and fast rules. As always, getting advice from others before you publish or print anything is absolutely vital. Even at a late stage, you need to be open-minded about changes other people might suggest. In the case of some areas of research, some crucial issues emerge that you cannot afford to ignore. If we are presenting information to others, we need to be sure that we respect different cultural outlooks and take many different perspectives into account.

Identifying Problems in *Questions of Travel*

The photography of Stone and Caddick are a good example of why this is so important. It soon became clear that the Benjamin Stone and Helen Caddick archive collections presented some very important and difficult issues to discuss. With critical awareness, it became clear that there were real dangers in viewing these pictures without understanding the racial perspectives held by Stone and Caddick. Both lived at a time in the late 19th century when the culture of the British Empire held highly problematic views of cultures as 'exotic'. How could this be constructively confronted in the *learning package*?

This issue was to become, in a sense, the central research issue behind *Questions of Travel*. Looking more closely at Stone and Caddick's pictures of other countries, we can hardly fail to notice their use of terms that we now consider offensive, such as 'hindoo coolie', 'savage', 'mulatto'. In this sense, the photographs of Stone and Caddick did not represent authentic views of other cultures, but the perspective of privileged travellers whose colonial gaze is evident in their view of the 'others' they sought to portray.

Meanwhile, other complicated issues started to emerge through the study of the life of Benjamin Stone with those of Helen Caddick. Women in England were themselves often given roles and travel was perceived as being the domain of men. As a female traveller decades before women were able to vote, would Caddick have empathised more with the subjects of her photography than Stone, a member of parliament, and a member of the late Victorian national elite? Dealing critically with issues of class cannot be done without considerations of gender and class.

Showing Awareness

Dealing with important and sensitive areas like 'race' in the photography of Benjamin Stone and Helen Caddick means directly showing awareness of the key issues and different political standpoints at stake. You will not be able to explain every aspect of their lives; you should aim at presenting balanced information so that others have the tools to come to their own conclusions. Rather than trying to hide from such issues, work with the problems you face in presenting materials. For instance, the first idea of a title for the exhibition on Stone and Caddick was *Pleasures of Travel* (this was taken from the advertisement of the public lecture Stone gave in Birmingham in 1874). However, it was decided that *Questions of Travel* was more appropriate as a way of including the viewer in a 'discussion'.

Furthermore, it was also decided to deal with the issues surrounding the problematic way Stone often titled and organised his photographs head on. The issues relating to the photograph captions were discussed as a critical way of learning about the history of race, rather than avoiding the difficult subject. Hopefully, this empowered the exhibition, rather than offended the viewer. The striking visual photographs used became tools to understand late 19th century attitudes more deeply. Rather than merely celebrating Stone and Caddick's photography, the information was presented to question its nature and show how the presentation of other countries, cultures and landscapes has always been problematic. The two sections of *Exploring Empire* and the *Races of Mankind* do not just celebrate the photographs shown, but highlight their contradictions.

Producing Learning

What is 'Learning'

How, in the end, do you create learning in others? This simple question can be notoriously difficult to answer. Giving people a list of, for example, historical dates about the life of a man like Benjamin Stone or Helen Caddick will provide some useful raw information. This is still only part of what it means to produce learning in its fullest sense. Simply giving facts does not explain why two such figures are still important today, how their lives were connected to the social and political context of Birmingham, or why people should make their own investigations into the collections you are foregrounding.

Creating open 'access' to knowledge without being intimidating is vitally important. Providing lists of resources opens starting points for others to engage with a new subject. It empowers people to do their own research after they have seen your work. Rather than 'telling' an audience why something is important, it is better to show the evidence by providing a range of information from different perspectives and let the audience come to its own conclusions. The audience will always bring their own perspective to the *learning package* you present; so rather than asserting you are 'right', is it better to be suggestive, open minded, ask questions, leaving open endings in your work. Learning should be active, not passive.

Developing and sharing ideas about our heritage and sharing knowledge about history should be open to everyone. We are all in education everyday of our lives. We can all contribute a perspective on what it is like to live in Birmingham. In this sense, producing learning on however great or small a subject links us to a stronger sense of belonging to a place and, hopefully, social justice. Ultimately, producing learning demands that you feel inspired to share you knowledge with others, whilst recognising that any 'knowledge' you share is not a defined object, but a living place where different ideas and histories connect and change.

Getting Feedback

Your project does not end there! An important part of your learning curve will be finding out what other people thought of your work.

- In what way was it successful?
- Where did it go wrong?
- Was it successful in engaging the audience you expected?
- Who else came into contact with your ideas?
- How would you do it differently next time?

If you have produced some exhibition panels that will be shown in a library, how do you know how many people have stopped and looked at your display? Or how can you find how many people have visited your website page? And even if you can ascertain such figures, how could you tell what effect it has had upon people? We are all surrounded by vast amounts of information everyday; what makes your learning succeed or fail?

Although there is no single solution, there are lots of different ways of getting feedback. You could ask people to fill in a questionnaire about your work. You could leave a comments book. Is there a discussion board connected to your website? Could you arrange to meet with people who have their own ideas about the issues you have presented? Could you have follow up sessions with members of a local history group?

Legacies and Archiving

After all the time it has taken to research, design, discuss, organise and present your work, what will be the long term future of the *learning package* you have created? Will people still be able to access your work? The long term 'legacy' of your project is important. You want your *learning package*, website page, exhibition, leaflet, booklet, illustrated guide, city trail, resource list, written introduction to remain available to public history. Your work should go on having relevance, with the opportunities to help others, to lead to new research or learning. Find out if an archives office, a local library, or a local history group will permanently house your *learning package*. Can you get your work on the web? Can your work get published? What will be your next *learning package*?

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www.connectinghistories.org.uk

