Where to Begin' Sharing a Community's War with the Young

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'How do we share the realities of what happened within our community during World War One with school children?' As someone who is fortunate to work alongside a multitude of passionate amateur historians and community groups I find this question posed to me in various formats with increasing anxiety and regularity. In assisting the design of community-led research I frequently engage with societies and organisations that have diverse agendas in relation to their projects. I am therefore used to responding to a number of similarly phrased questions and to overcoming difficult obstacles in translating the traditionally academic into accessible community resources. But this question, no matter how regularly it arose at meetings, frequently left me stumped.

For several months my standard response became: 'I am working on designing a resource for community groups on World War One.' As the words left my mouth I knew that I had only a vague idea of how I would produce this resource or what it would consist of. Yet the response at community meetings was gratitude and excitement with requests to be added to my - not yet created - 'World War One mailing list.' I began to construct an approach. I would design a session about creating school packs which would focus on effectively sharing the history of the local community during World War One with local children. From experience I knew that when assisting local people with projects and research, an informal and relaxed learning environment can help overcome difficult problems through shared learning. For example, a session led by an academic colleague at a local community centre about using archive services or digitising old photographs. However, the more I thought about the topic and the intended output there still seemed to be something missing from this approach.

When I think about traditional approaches to working with the community in this way several terms spring to mind, whether it applies to your demeanour or your style of approach: 'inclusive', 'friendly' 'accessible' and 'approachable.' Such terms did not appear to apply in terms of both approaching the translation of academic subject matter into materials for schools, or indeed the subject itself.
Where to begin' I had learnt from leading previous community workshops not to muddy the waters: run the session for community groups only, identify the subject that the community groups wish to focus on, or the skill they wish to acquire, and ideally have a person with community or public engagement experience to lead the session. Based on these past sessions, and through much deliberation, I realised that in this instance the approach demanded more. The desired outcome called for in-depth knowledge, skill, delicacy and a large amount of experience in translating a difficult task and large subject into usable resources for the local people and in turn the young.

I began to email and call upon friends and colleagues to ask for advice and to enquire if anyone had successfully overcome a similar challenge. To my surprise my inbox quickly swelled. I soon realised, however, that the general sentiment was one of sympathy for the difficult task that lay ahead and that my colleagues had attempted something similar before, but 'successfully' wasn't the correct term.

I felt defeated and bewildered by enthusiastic, but slightly confusing, offers of assistance. I then began to recognise that in feeling under pressure to produce such a resource, as the demand for World War One commemoration mounts, I had become intimidated by the topic and overwhelmed by community expectations. I had forgotten, or misunderstood, the reason why the local people wanted so badly to tell the story of their community during World War One. Then it struck me. Those who fell or those who survived the Great War were, and are, our communities. They are our past and in that way there is a commonality, relevance and a relatable connection between our communities then and our communities today, and that can be made accessible to anyone, of any age.

With this realisation in the foreground of my mind, an approach began to form and my task appeared straight forward. Sharing a community's history during World War One needn't be in any way different to teaching any other topic, lesson or skill which the community wish to focus on or learn. I would not change my approach or demeanour; both the topic and I would be 'inclusive' 'approachable' and 'accessible.' I just needed a specialist, as was often the case, with the right experience ' in this instance a retired teacher. When I spoke to her on the phone and told her of the worries that had led to our conversation, she laughed and said: 'If they want to learn then I will teach them! Any subject is approachable and is only as hard or complicated as you make it.' She was right. The community were motivated to learn, they saw the commonalities within their communities during the war and in the generations since, and they wanted to share that knowledge with others. To do this they simply needed a guide and I realised that where there is a human story and a community with an eagerness to learn, any topic is teachable.

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