

SPOTLIGHT ON MUSEUM ED

This column explores innovative informal education projects being undertaken within our local museum community. As active spaces for dialogue, connection and critical thinking, it seeks to highlight programming that makes our institutions more inclusive and that encourage more meaningful engagement with our visitors.



Engaging with Complexity: Teaching Difficult Histories in Museums

Over the past 30 years, museums around the world have become more willing to take on difficult histories in their exhibitions and programming. The narratives of these histories are complex and often controversial, ranging from past mass atrocities to contemporary human rights issues. Uniquely placed to address difficult subject matter, museums have the ability to bring awareness to these challenging histories and generate a dialogue by

sharing the multiple perspectives reflected in the objects and stories that have been entrusted to us by the community.

As museum educators, creating and delivering programs on these topics can be a daunting task. Instead of telling one over-arching story throughout a program, multiple (often conflicting) perspectives must be shared. These differing accounts are often compelling because they

provide the opportunity for individual investigation and empower students to think critically, challenging their existing views on a topic. Exploring multiple perspectives also provides the chance for

students to make personal connections and draw parallels with their own lives through shared emotions and experiences.

Within BC, most resources that support teaching difficult histories are either found online or take the form of outreach materials. A few examples include the [Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre's Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust](#), the Royal BC Museum's [The Writing on the Wall](#) outreach kit on Chinese Canadian historical wrongs and the Nikkei National Museum's JOURNEYS education kit on Japanese Canadian internment and redress. Programs for school groups that focus exclusively on one of these challenging topics are relatively rare and are often tied to temporary or travelling exhibits, such as the [Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru](#) exhibit at the Surrey Art Gallery and the [Witness Blanket](#) installation at the New Westminster Museum. Launched this past September at



Above: Jim Kishi's suitcase.
Photo credit: Steveston Museum.

the Steveston Museum, The *Nikkei Return* is the first school program of its kind to focus exclusively on the internment experiences of a local Japanese Canadian community during and after the Second World War.

The Nikkei Return

Building upon stories told within the Steveston Museum's exhibits, The *Nikkei Return* highlights the resiliency of the Japanese Canadian community in Richmond during and after their World War II internment. Given the difficult nature of this content, the program endeavors to strike a balance between sharing stories of hardship and triumph. Developed over the course of several years, the process was guided by the core themes of human rights and resiliency and shaped by consultation with local community members.

The program is comprised of two main components. First, a brief historical walking tour of Steveston provides an overview of the vibrant Nikkei community that was forcibly removed from the coast in 1942. Intermediate students then become acquainted with two community members, exploring each of their lives through a suitcase filled with artefacts, documents and archival images. The personal stories shared through this new program capture the range of experiences that Steveston's Nikkei community had during and after World War II. The six individuals that were cho-



Above: Yuto Takahashi's suitcase. Photo credit: Steveston Museum.

sen represent a snapshot of these experiences, from Roy Hamaguchi, the young boy whose family lived in three different internment camps between 1942 and 1945, to Kazue Oye, a single mother who struggled to decide whether to move east of the Rockies or be repatriated to Japan when she couldn't return home to Steveston after the war ended. Objects within the suitcase help to

provide tangible, tactile connections to their lives, while diary-style labels convey emotions that each individual felt about their treatment during and after internment by the government and Canadian society, ranging from fear and shame to anger and resentment.

The program concludes with a group discussion where students



Above: Students exploring objects in Hideo Hyodo's suitcase.
Photo credit: Steveston Museum.

are encouraged to share their opinions and feelings, ask questions or simply reflect upon the stories of the community members they have discovered during the program. By fostering these emotional connections and encouraging them to view the past from a different perspective, we hope to help students feel empowered to be more empathetic and to think critically about discrimination and injustices within their own community.

If your institution is thinking about creating an education program that tackles a difficult history, here are a few tips to get you started:

- Use multiple perspectives to reflect the variety of experiences
- Provide opportunities for sensory engagement (ie. object-handling, storytelling)
- Allow time for reflection and questions
- Reach out to local community members who may want to share their stories

References:

Five Ways Museums Can Increase Empathy in the World,

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