Case Study 1: Keiko Higashi and the Powell-Cotton Museum

I did Graeme's Community Philosophy Facilitator Training Course in 2014. It was inspiring, a brilliant two days, and Graeme was an incredible facilitator. I could see immediately how it would work in practice.



Consultation In Action: from left to right: Keiko with one of the artefacts she used as a stimulus for Community Philosophy; participants in conversation; the hugely popular new gallery 6 that was developed as a result (photo credit: Nikhilesh Havel).

I began to use Community Philosophy to find out what people really wanted from the Powell-Cotton Museum in Kent. One of the discussions was about whether the museum should ever have collected animals for taxidermy. This philosophical approach revealed that the issue was not, in fact, about Victorian dioramas, but the hierarchy between academics and others. It shed light on major internal problems that had impacted on previous projects, to the extent that the museum had been at risk of closure.

The method was invaluable; it helped to get a sense of community, it changed how people perceived us: they realised that difficult discussions could take place, and they could participate in decisions, and it would be OK. So when it came to work on redeveloping Gallery 6 with Arts Council funding, visitors and staff alike trusted the process. It felt genuine. They knew that we would listen. We even sent transcripts of the sessions to the rest of the organisation, the architect and designers, so that they would know exactly what people were saying, and this influenced the final design and content.

The Gallery was originally thought of as a space where people could watch researchers at work through a glass window. But the Community Philosophy sessions revealed that people felt this made researchers look 'more important'. So we said, 'Right, let's start from the premise that anyone can be a researcher.' We ended up with a very popular hands-on space in which the public were effectively co-curators.

Another thing that came out was that there was a real fear that the new gallery would end up too modern, that it would lose the beauty of the original Victorian museum. Again, as a result of Community Philosophy, we decided to spend our budget on refurbishing the old wooden cabinets instead of on shiny new units.

All too often when we say we are doing consultation, we have expectations of what we want; we don't get into deeper conversations with those we are consulting, about what *they* want, and why, and the questions *they* want to ask. Community Philosophy is completely inclusive, it's about genuine conversation and respect. It breaks down barriers between the organisation and the people it wants to communicate with.

Before re-development, 6% of visitors said Gallery 6 was their favourite. After, it was more than 50%. The dwell time in other galleries is 2-6 mns; in Gallery 6 it's 22 mns, and parents say they can't get children out!

Community Philosophy has totally changed my practice, both personally and professionally, and it has since been embraced by the senior management. If you are serious about hearing people's views, then Community Philosophy is a brilliant tool. I can't recommend Graeme's training course highly enough.

Brown, S. and Higashi, K. 2015. 'Tea, Cake and Conversation: Creating a community at the Powell-Cotton Museum'. *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 28: 107-121.