Course Description

*From Controversy to Community Engagement: How to turn Disputes into Dialogue*

Heritage is an inherently contested terrain. Struggles over how we remember and represent the past are inextricably linked to struggles over representation and resources in the present. Managers of heritage sites will never be able to isolate themselves from conflicts with and among their communities – but they do have a choice of how to relate to the issues underlying these conflicts. Should heritage sites engage directly in controversies? Or would this alienate certain publics, governing bodies, and supporters? But if sites stay completely silent on the issues that are of greatest concern to their communities, will they be rejected as irrelevant and unresponsive? Or is there a middle road, in which sites can serve as forums for their publics to gain historical perspective on the questions they are grappling with today – even the questions that divide them – and discuss how they should be addressed in the future?

Course Goals and Objectives

This course explores hidden opportunities that can lie in confronting controversy, and how to avoid some of the pitfalls. The course will draw on examples from the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a worldwide network of heritage sites specifically dedicated to remembering past struggles for justice and addressing their contemporary legacies. Led by 17 Accredited Sites of Conscience and including more than 250 members in 45 countries, Coalition member sites share a common commitment to:

- interpret history through historic sites;
- engage in programs that stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues;
- promote humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function; and
- share opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at their site.

The course will share and analyze examples of site in the US and around the world that have both successfully and unsuccessfully engaged with a wide range of conflicts – both conflicts directed at the site itself, and conflicts between communities surrounding the sites. The course will explore strategies such as how to identify and engage key stakeholders in a conflict; techniques for facilitating effective dialogue; how to raise difficult questions without having to take sides on the answers; and how to communicate your role as a facilitator or forum in order to win your publics’ trust as a space where multiple perspectives are welcome. Participants will be introduced to leaders in the Sites of Conscience movement that have worked intensively with these strategies, from such diverse sites as Memoria Abierta in Argentina to the Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in Russia to the District Six Museum in South Africa. Course participants will also be given access to the Coalition’s Online Forum, where members of the Coalition’s learning community exchange proven program models across diverse international contexts. Finally, participants in the course will introduce their own scenarios around dealing with controversy for the group to workshop.