Igniting Connections: How Community Collaboration Organically Creates Success

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Abstract

Redefining Home: A Story of Japanese Canadian Resettlement in Toronto explores the story of Harold and Hana Kawasoe, a young Japanese Canadian couple, who chose Toronto as their new home in the face of immeasurable loss they, and many other Japanese Canadians faced during the Second World War. Using a co-curation approach to share the Kawasoe story, the exhibit team discovered how community collaboration and the facilitation of diverse experiences can organically create support and success for museums and historic houses. *Redefining Home* offers a lens through which the strengths and weaknesses of this method can be seen, and this paper further discusses how it can be implemented by others going forward. Igniting community connections and creating platforms for many voices offers museums valuable and important insight into diverse and unique narratives.

Keywords

case study, community collaboration, museums, exhibition development, co-curation

In the winter of 2019, Campbell House Museum hosted a powerful exhibition that explored the forced relocation of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. *Redefining Home: A Story of Japanese Canadian Resettlement in Toronto* uncovered the story of Harold and Hana Kawasoe, a young Japanese Canadian couple who lived in the attic of Campbell House from 1948-1951. During the Second World War, 22,000 Japanese Canadians were forcibly evicted from their homes along the coast of British Columbia. Most were forced into internment camps in the province's interior, while others were sent to farming or labour camps throughout the country. Some Japanese Canadians, including Harold and Hana Kawasoe, sought to build new lives in Toronto. This exhibition followed the individual journeys of Harold and Hana as they sought out new lives in a foreign city, while also exploring the broader narrative of Japanese Canadian resettlement in Toronto.

Redefining Home was curated by three Master of Museum Studies students as their final capstone project. As a case study for community collaboration, it is important to note that no one on the exhibit team identified as Japanese Canadian. Therefore, it was vital to ensure that community collaboration and facilitation were at the fore of the project. The success of the exhibition can be attributed to the extensive collaboration with the Japanese Canadian community. The exhibit team acted as facilitators of a larger story, rather than traditional, authoritarian curators. The collaborative efforts with the Kawasoe family and other Japanese Canadian institutions, as well as community stakeholders became the core of the exhibition.

The exhibition also featured art installations from two contemporary Japanese Canadian artists. Their reflective artworks evoked a more intimate understanding of their own experiences with being Japanese Canadian. It was vital to emphasize that these narratives and stories did not cease to exist after internment. The effects of internment continue to be felt in today's Japanese Canadian community. Working with the family and artists meant being open to their voices, concerns, and ideas. The exhibition became bigger than the space. It was an emotional response to a horrific time in Canadian history. Communication and collaboration became key pieces in ensuring that the Kawasoe's story and the artists' visions were not censored or overshadowed. In order to have a far reaching impact, the stories had to come from those who belonged to the Japanese Canadian community.

Redefining Home worked with multiple stakeholders, leading to many intersecting layers of collaboration. Open communication amongst these stakeholders was essential in ensuring that this difficult period in Canadian history was treated with sensitivity and authenticity. Collaboration with the Kawasoe family further highlighted and made sense of the wider history of Japanese Canadians through a more intimate family connection. This close collaboration organically created support for the project and the exhibition.

Igniting Connections

With a lack of community representation on the curatorial team, forging relationships and inviting voices into the curatorial process was understood as essential. From the beginning of the project the team understood that success would not be achievable if authentic voices were not included in the exhibition. The complexity and intimate nature of the story meant that it needed representation, and that it was not a topic to be addressed lightly. Relationships with community members were cultivated early so that their expertise could be used in all stages of the project. To ignite these connections, the exhibit team transitioned from a traditional curatorial into a role where they were instead facilitating a story and retaining its authentic voice.

The most important relationship the team formed was that with the Kawasoe family. When the exhibition was proposed by Campbell House, contact with the Kawasoes had not been made, meaning their level of involvement in the exhibition was not yet known. Fragments of their story had been brought to Campbell House by a visitor, and the museum wanted to explore this previously untold history further. Reaching out to the family was the first and most crucial step of the process because without this relationship, the exhibition would not have been able to move forward as planned. Therefore, connecting with the family was twofold; to learn more about Harold's and Hana's lives, and to make sure that their story was being treated with respect.

However, the Kawasoe story was not the only story that the exhibition would explore. It would also connect Harold and Hana to the larger narrative of what was happening to the Japanese Canadian community during and after internment, particularly in Toronto. In addition to seeking a relationship with the Kawasoe family, there was a need for the larger Japanese Canadian community to be involved. The team knew that the experiences of Japanese Canadians should be told by Japanese Canadians, and not by themselves. Recognizing how sensitive and complex these histories are helps you to recognize that your perspective is not the one that needs to be shared. A space was provided for the Kawasoe family, and other Japanese Canadians, to retain this history as their own, and share their outlook and perspectives, allowing their voices to overshadow the often Eurocentric view of this topic.

The exhibit team made their first community connection with the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre (JCCC), who offered their assistance with the project immediately. Forming this relationship from the beginning of the project gave the team the support they needed to carry the exhibition forward. Once this initial connection was made, there were a number of other stakeholder relationships that naturally formed. Artists, as well as other community members, were contacted as a result of these connections. These relationships continued to form naturally throughout the exhibition process, with stakeholders willing and excited to share their stories. The team activated their community

connections in four ways: focusing the exhibit's narrative, partnering with artists, co-producing exhibit content, and promotion.

Focusing the Exhibit's Narrative. The team was determined not to wrongfully represent the history of Japanese Canadians. Originally, they had envisioned an exhibition whose narrative covered all aspects of the internment and forced relocation of Japanese Canadians. However, due to the constraints of the exhibition space and the limited time for planning, it was impossible to justly cover all aspects of this complex history. Through stakeholder meetings, Japanese Canadian individuals and organizations assisted the team in condensing the exhibit's narrative. Community members advised the team to focus the exhibit on the story of Harold and Hana Kawasoe, only using the larger history as context for the Kawasoe's story. Community connections ensured that the exhibition did not trivialize or oversimplify the diverse experiences of Japanese Canadians.

Partnering with Artists. Through building connections with community stakeholders, the team was able to find two Japanese Canadian artists to display in the exhibition. These two artists reflected on their Japanese Canadian identity and heritage. They were excited to respond to Harold's and Hana's stories as well as their own experiences as Japanese Canadians. The artistic vision of these artists was also vital to the message and tone of the exhibition. The exhibit team chose not to curate the artwork in order to give authority to the artists, whose pieces were an intimate response to their identities. A conscious decision was made to support their artistic visions and remove as many barriers as possible. With such an emotionally driven topic, the team wanted to take a step back, allowing the artists to respond organically and share that same organic response in the exhibition.

Co-Curating Exhibit Content. *Redefining Home* used a co-curation process between the exhibit team and community stakeholders. This process included the co-writing of exhibit text, and the co-selection of images and objects for display. All of the exhibit's didactic materials, including its title, text panels, object labels, and promotional material were approved by various community stakeholders. The final materials were reviewed and edited by five external community partners. These partners ensured that the terminology, tone, voice, and facts used in the didactics were correct. The Kawasoe family and the JCCC played a key role in assisting the team in the selection of images and objects for the exhibit, many of which were family heirlooms. The team gave the Kawasoe family final approval on the use of their family heirlooms and photographs prior to the exhibit's opening. Community connections and partnerships were important to ensure that the final exhibit was culturally appropriate and respectful. Throughout the co-curation process, the exhibit team included as many community partners as possible. The team continued to foster these growing community relationships by regularly updating partners on the evolution of the project, encouraging their feedback, and asking for their involvement.

Promotion. The widespread promotion of the exhibition within the Japanese Canadian community in Toronto was due to the community connections the exhibit team had made. The JCCC and other Japanese Canadian organizations helped to promote the exhibition through various media channels free of charge. As word of the exhibition spread, more interest was garnered within the Japanese Canadian community. The exhibition drew the attention of the *Nikkei Voice*, a national Japanese Canadian newspaper, who published an article about the exhibit in their newspaper and on their website. Eventually, the community's interest in the exhibit drew the attention of other media outlets, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). The CBC covered the exhibition online, on radio programs, and in their evening televised broadcasts. This allowed the exhibit to be promoted to audiences outside of the Japanese Canadian community.

Igniting connections means reaching out to all available community members. At the beginning of the project, the team made lists of community members and groups who held a stake in this exhibition, especially given the sensitive nature of the exhibit's topic. While some connections may seem straightforward, more connections can be found by connecting with community members on a personal level. The team remained open and willing to listen to countless different voices, and this helped to generate excitement for the project in members of the community.

Co-Curation: Community Knowledge and Facilitating Stories

During *Redefining Home's* development, the exhibit team found that co-curation was the most effective curatorial method. This was because there was a clear divide between published research material on Japanese Canadian history and community knowledge. Both before and throughout the project, the exhibit team conducted extensive scholarly and archival research. However, this research was not what defined the final exhibit. Instead, *Redefining Home* was directed by the knowledge and stories of the Kawasoe family and the Japanese Canadian community. The archival and scholarly research provided the historical context for the exhibit, while the Kawasoe's story provided the heart of the exhibition. The exhibit team strove to balance these narratives and ensure that they complimented one another. Speaking and listening to the Japanese Canadian community changed the way the exhibit team interacted with the historical material moving forward.

Engaging with community knowledge led to an organic story being told. The exhibit team did not approach this exhibition with a set story and narrative in mind, as is common in traditional curatorship. Instead, through talking and listening with Japanese Canadians who experienced these events, the story naturally began to shape around their knowledge. Interviews organically formed the content of the exhibition. Everything discussed in the exhibition was based on first hand accounts, making the story more personal and less academic. This allowed visitors to feel more intimately connected with the story by seeing aspects of their own lives reflected in that of the Kawasoes.

Co-curating with the Kawasoe family, the Japanese Canadian community, and the artists meant that *authenticity* and *sensitivity* became the guiding principles throughout the process. As facilitators to the story, the exhibit team listened to what others wanted to see and include. Nothing was included that had not been discussed, or if information and details were vague. All of the text and object/image labels were confirmed and verified by five different external community stakeholders. This was a decision that greatly benefitted the exhibition's content. Not only were spelling mistakes and errors caught, but everyone became invested in making sure that the content was appropriate and accurate. The Kawasoe family had final say on the content, after it had been edited and reworked, as this was their parent's story. The exhibit team understood that the Kawasoe family was revealing their family's story to a broad audience, and it was therefore essential to tell their story in the way that they wanted.

The internment of Japanese Canadians is an emotionally charged topic, so when advice was given by community members, it was followed. The community had more knowledge and understanding of the topic, and therefore, they were the experts on how to approach and discuss it. The ability to listen and remain flexible to change made *Redefining Home* a success. Exhibition issues are solved best through compromise, effective communication, and actively listening to stakeholder needs. A curatorial vision is important, but not at the cost of a community's knowledge, sense of self, and emotional and mental wellbeing. Being able to talk with communities, and not about them, is the most important part of utilizing a co-curation method. As such, the exhibit team acted as facilitators to the story, rather than the traditional, authoritative roles that curators take on in museums and historic houses.

Facilitating the story of the Kawasoe family was only the beginning of the process. Once interviews had begun, the team reached out to two contemporary Japanese Canadian artists to exhibit their work in the space and complement Harold and Hana's story. This was another aspect of the co-curation of *Redefining Home* that helped facilitate storytelling. Art is inherently a personal and intimate form of storytelling, and of transferring knowledge and experiences. The artists' reflective artworks evoked a more intimate understanding of their own experiences of being Japanese Canadian. The artists directed their entire vision. The exhibit team merely facilitated the install and coordinated with Campbell House to ensure that the materials being used would not damage the building. The artists had complete control over their story, including how it was displayed, and the story being told. The exhibit team also made the artists write the didactic materials that accompanied their pieces. This was to ensure that the artists' visions and stories were being treated with sensitivity and authenticity. It was not the exhibit teams place to impose their own vision onto the artists' work, especially with such an emotionally charged and deeply personal topic.

Co-curation proved to be the only viable method for engaging with the content of the exhibition. It brings communities and museums together and encourages each to listen and work with the

other. Many lessons were learned through openness, flexibility, and a willingness to change. Facilitating and collaborating can lead museums to an organic, intimate story. These stories can touch people on more personal levels.

Organic Success

Throughout the process of collaboration and co-curation with the Japanese Canadian community, *Redefining Home* was able to create organic success. The exhibit team was not talking about the community, but rather talking with them throughout the process. Team members remained open and transparent about their lack of knowledge on the subject and actively sought out advice when it was needed. *Redefining Home* organically created its own success through *Approaching the Community*, *Giving Authority*, and *Exciting Through Engagement*. These are lessons that the team learned throughout the process that helped the exhibition reach success.

Approach the Community. Community stakeholders were immediately interested in the project and willing to offer advice and resources to the team. This was because of the willingness to approach them at the outset of the project. They did not wait for these organizations to come to them, or wait until they reached a major hurdle in the planning process. Approaching the community and establishing these relationships from the beginning stages demonstrated that the exhibit team was willing to listen to the concerns of stakeholders. The exhibit team also remained transparent during initial stakeholder meeting and throughout the exhibit planning process.

Give Authority. The exhibit team was responsible for determining the exhibit's final design and display. However, it was the Kawasoe family and community members who authorized what was said and how it was said. This ensured that the narrative was an accurate representation of the Kawasoe's history, and that curatorial vision did not impose itself, or try to speak for the family.

Excite Through Engagement. The exhibition garnered an amazing response from the Japanese Canadian community, both at the opening reception and throughout its duration. This excitement was due to both the intimate nature of the story, and the exploration of an underrepresented period in Canadian history. Individuals outside of the Japanese Canadian community also connected and engaged with the exhibition. This connection was common amongst immigrant and refugee visitors who have also redefined their idea of home.

Redefining Home's engagement with the Japanese Canadian community also occurred in unexpected ways. Organic community connections were formed when visitors found family members or long-lost friends in the Kawasoe's photos. This was an unexpected but heartwarming aspect that made the exhibition extend beyond the walls of Campbell House. The exhibit's success was not just measured in the number of visitors it received. Success was also found in those small moments

when visitors discovered more about themselves and their families. Visitors connected to one story, the Kawasoe story, which ultimately represented the stories of many.

Moving Forward

In the process of creating *Redefining Home*, the exhibit team constantly evaluated their co-curation methods. During this time of self-reflexivity, the team determined the four practices that led them to be successful community collaborators. The exhibit team believes that museums should adopt these practices to be more inclusive and inviting in the future. The practices include: *Utilizing Untold Stories*, *Continuing Collaboration*, *Facilitation*, and *Intimate Knowledge*.

Utilizing Untold Stories. Museums and historic houses have deep and complex histories that are often overlooked or hidden. Working closely with untold narratives can help historic houses embrace their complex and rounded histories, rather than remaining focused on one time period. A home is so much more than one family or narrative, it holds the stories of countless people that are waiting to be shared. Historic homes contain numerous co-existing stories. Just like Campbell House and *Redefining Home*, it is important to interpret these houses beyond their stagnant, Eurocentric displays. Acknowledging diverse stories can help a historic house reach new audiences, while further exploring their complex histories.

Continuing Collaboration. It is vital to share and consult with those whose stories you are telling. Collaboration with communities means going past an initial consultation. Collaboration is an ongoing process, from the beginning to the end, and perhaps even after the project is over. *Redefining Home* had a variety of community stakeholders who had input into the text and images. All didactic material was confirmed by various community groups, including the family members. These working relationships helped to foster trust and respect. It also allowed the collaboration to continue past the installation of the exhibition.

Facilitation. Moving forward with community collaboration and utilizing it effectively also involves being aware of the stories that are being shared. Facilitating the story is more important than telling the story. In the case of *Redefining Home*, facilitation allowed the Kawasoe family to ensure that their narrative was being treated with respect and authenticity. Respect for the message that was important to them, and authenticity in the story that was being shared with the public.

Intimate Knowledge. Community groups and members already have a deep seated understanding of their history and stories. One story can never encapsulate the whole. One story can, however, offer a personal connection to a wider narrative and offer a starting point for others to share their experiences and understanding. *Redefining Home* was about the Kawasoe family. This made the exhibition more personal and intimate, and resonated with visitors on a deeper level. Yet, community and family members ultimately determined how much of their intimate stories could be shared in the

exhibit. Listening, being open, and being considerate of these requests can help museums and historic houses make connections with visitors on a deeper level. This creates a more holistic and inclusive space, preventing visitors from having to try and make connections with broad concepts. One ordinary story can have an extraordinary impact.

Implementing a co-curation method can assist museums in embracing diverse narratives. The most incredible stories can be found in the most unlikely of places, one just has to listen and be open. Sharing in the curatorial practice can diversify a museum's understanding of events, and it can offer new, intimate knowledge. *Redefining Home's* exhibit team acted as a facilitator of the Kawasoe story. It did not seek to take over their narrative, but instead offered a place for the story to thrive and come to light. Co-curation and facilitation with community members opens up avenues for more holistic storytelling and should be implemented as the museum profession moves forward. These are not stories for the curators alone to tell. The community is the core and the heart of a story, and their presence and truths should not be overlooked.

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Redefining Home can be viewed at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, Toronto until September 2019.