Remembrance and the teaching of memory

April 26 2017

In the midst of ANZAC Day commemorations, a timely paper explores the role of digital technologies in how we think about war and peace.

Debate about how best to commemorate fallen soldiers is nothing new; the building of the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance was itself a source of controversy at the time.

However, the introduction of digital technologies into memorial spaces has triggered a new phase in the ongoing discussion. What is the role of public war memorials, like the Shrine, in "teaching memory" and encouraging critical discussion about peace and war?

"With all sites of remembrance there is a tension and a need to strike a balance in the relationship between commemoration, education and tourism, as well as helping people to learn about sacrifice, war and peace-keeping," said Dr Steven Cooke, a researcher with Deakin University's Faculty of Arts and Education and Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation.

"However, interaction between the digital and the architecture of the Shrine as 'technologies of remembrance' has resulted in new ways to allow visitors to 'witness' and actively participate in the ongoing work of memory and creating spaces for critique."

Dr Cooke co-authored the paper, "Teaching Memory: digital interpretation at the Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne," with the University of Melbourne's Professor Hannah Lewi.

The paper was presented this month at the University of Queensland's "digital cultural heritage: FUTURE VISIONS" conference and is part of an Australian Research Council citizen heritage project exploring sense of place and digital heritage.

Between 2001 and 2014, the Shrine of Remembrance was redeveloped with new exhibition spaces – the Galleries of Remembrance – which include interactive digital interpretation, and screen-based displays, as well as mobile apps to explore the Shrine and wider commemorative landscape.

Through analysis of interviews with developers and curators, briefing documents for the digital exhibits and arguments about commemoration and digital technologies, Dr Cooke's and Prof Lewi's paper examines the interaction between various "technologies of remembrance": the active participation of the material world in eliciting remembrance which includes the digital, but also the architectural spaces through which visitors engage with the digital.

"People tend to see architecture and the use of digital technologies as separate, and focus on digital interpretations but not look how the architecture, the internal geography of the building and the digital additions relate," Prof Lewi explained.

"You can see at the Shrine that the physical architecture of the monument, the new additions and the new digital content coalesce.

"They 'teach memory' but they also create a more sensory and evocative experience and by doing so create 'a witness' through a personal engagement with the past."

Dr Cooke, who spent three years as head of education and community programs at the Shrine prior to his role at Deakin, said the phrase

"teaching memory" was coined by the Shrine as it sought to maintain relevance for new generations.

"'Teaching memory' is about using digital technology and installations to help younger generations engage with the commemorative landscape," Dr Cooke said.

"It's also about how the technology works with the existing Shrine architecture and spaces and its new additions."

Dr Cooke said the Shrine was conceived at the end of the First World War to commemorate the service and sacrifice of Australian servicemen and women, and to serve as a "surrogate grave" for those who were buried overseas.

It also served as a "warning on the hill" about what happens when differences between countries are not reconciled through peaceful means.

"The new additions with representations of trenches, of blood, of poppies are a confronting contrast to the classical Greek architecture and sculptural reliefs of the original Shrine. It's very much about the effects of war on bodies rather than a focus on triumphal space," Dr Cooke explained.

"The redevelopment has allowed visitors to use the architectural components of the building and the digital interpretation to engage in critical discussions about conflict and Australia's involvement in war.

"It's not just about commemoration, it's about what we learn from history and how we might make different decisions in the future."