

Comment

Literature review

Leonardo Alfonsi

Few research studies have been conducted on the interpreter's role in a Science Centre. Although the importance of this role is always stressed by museum practitioners, it seems that anecdotal evidence is the main source of information on this theme. The experience of a visitor in a Science Centre as well as in other museums has, among other things, well defined social dimensions. These dimensions are crucial in determining the quality and enjoyment of a visitor's experience. There is evidence^{1,2,3,4,5} that suggests visitors go to a museum to meet others. Among the people that visitors meet in a Science Centre are interpreters, who help them not only to use and understand the exhibits but also to become familiar with a new environment. The following sections will illustrate what research studies say about interpreters, considering their twofold relation with visitors and exhibit developers.

Are interpreters important?

The opinion that interpreters are pivotal characters inside a Science Centre is a common one: "The value of interpretative staff on a hands-on gallery is, I believe, without question".⁶ It has been stressed that even though there won't be too many people who want to know specific exhibit contents, such as the theory of a polarising filter or of a plasma dome, one of the main aims of a Science Centre is to provide the answer when someone asks. It has also been suggested that even though the right answer is not the main aim,⁷ the spirit of inquiry is. And the role of an interpreter is, among other things, to promote this attitude during the visit to a Science Centre. Again, during the ASTC conference 1997 it was stressed that interpreters represent the human face of science, the face that people want to meet. However not only Science Centre practitioners stress the relevance of the interpreter's role. Visitors also show a high level of interest in interacting with other people working on the exhibition floor.

An analysis of differences between visitors at natural history museums and Science Centres⁸ stressed how the interpretive strategies rated highest by visitors to both of these places were live demonstrations. A possible interpretation for this choice was that adults want to have access to knowledgeable people to whom they can address questions. This interpretation confirms studies which found that visitors were not likely to use thematic guides or long folders designed to stimulate questioning and would prefer talking to knowledgeable individuals rather than reading printed information.⁹ It was also stressed that this way visitors don't have to wade through text to find answers to their questions. The interpreters' importance is stressed both for interaction with the general public and with other kinds of Science Centre visitors such as school groups. As reported by McCrory¹⁰ the important role that the interpreters play in structuring the experience, facilitating learning and prompting questions from the students, is well recognised by practitioners and teachers.

Why are they important?

According to some Science Centre practitioners the interpreters' main role is to help visitors explore phenomena they observe, building confidence and highlighting to people the fact that science and technology is all around us.¹¹ It was noticed¹² that even when a group of people are visiting a museum and don't interact with an official interpreter, someone in the group assumes the role of a guide calling attention to an object, acting to highlight facts and to draw the visitors attention to particular phenomena.

Other behaviour of people acting as helpers without being official Science Centre interpreters was also highlighted: 11 different types of interaction occurring between helpers and children in a school group were observed at the exhibits¹³ highlighting other features of the interpreters' role. Other studies stressed how children see staff members to whom they ask questions as caring and knowledgeable.¹⁴ Their social role seems to be the main one and even though they are referred to as knowledgeable people there is little research conducted into their contribution to visitors' learning.¹⁵ How their knowledge should be used is the object of other observations. Russell and Edwards¹⁶ suggest they try, particularly with children, to make nearly everything they say end with a question mark, instead of overloading children with explanations. The *explanatum compulsivum* is described¹⁷ as the need of interpreters and adult people in general to give explanations overloading visitors, especially children with information. What the visitors' perception of interpreters is has not been much investigated. A research study about The Exploratorium explainer program¹⁸ showed that visitors' perception of explainers was represented on one side by those who perceived them as active agents who give demonstrations and approach visitors to offer assistance and on the other side by those who perceived explainers as essentially passive agents who give information if asked and who look after the exhibits.

Explainers and exhibit developers

The interpreter is described as the human link between the visitors and exhibit developers who transform ideas in objects, working with scientists too.¹⁹ Although all museums practitioners seem to agree with this role of interpreters, more features have also been suggested. Falk and Dierking¹ stress that: "Museum staff and docents have played a longstanding role in helping to interpret exhibits to the public, but historically they have been left completely out of exhibit development". However they also indicate the trend of many museums now attempting to involve educational staff and volunteers in exhibit development²⁰ and other processes. Yet, the involvement of interpreters in the developers' activity continues to be a problem, since the "creative work" is an activity that is done far from the exhibition floor and explainers are not often asked for input.²¹ This feature involves aspects of interpreters' management about which research studies are few in number or being planned at the moment.²² Most of the opinions expressed by practitioners in this field derive from their own personal experiences or anecdotal evidence, as they all admit and one is always wondering whether this is representative of the experience of all interpreters and people working in similar jobs.

What's next

The panorama of research studies about interpreters highlights a wide agreement among Science Centre practitioners about the role of interpreters, but it also reveals that little research has been done into the visitors' perception of the interpreters' role and into the match between the role practitioners assign to interpreters, and the role interpreters actually play. The other important issue that emerged from this literature review was the involvement of interpreters in creative processes such as exhibit development in Science Centres. Further investigations and detailed research should be focused on each particular theme, and a comparison of the interpreter's role at Science Centres in different countries could be also very useful.

Notes and references

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Author

Leonardo Alfonsi is a Physicist and a Science Communicator. After the degree in Physics Leonardo Alfonsi spent a year at Techniquist science discovery centre, combining work-experience with study for the MSc in Communicating Science awarded by the University of Glamorgan. The dissertation phase of the Master's programme allowed Alfonsi to make a comparative study of Interpreter/visitor and Interpreter/exhibit-developer interactions at Techniquist, Cardiff, Città della Scienza, Naples, and the Exploratorium, San Francisco. Leonardo Alfonsi worked at the Infn (Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare) Press Office from January 2001 to December 2002, during this period he attended the Master in Science Communication run by SISSA, the International School for Advanced Studies in Trieste. Since November 2002 Alfonsi has been collaborating with the course in Science Museology and Science Centre Communication run by SISSA. Since July 2003 Leonardo Alfonsi has been working in the team who organises the Perugia Science Festival and from November 2004 is the scientific director of the Festival. Email: leonardo.alfonsi@libero.it