Museum Volunteers

Good Practice in the Management of Volunteers

Sinclair Goodlad and Stephanie McIvor
Museum Volunteers
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Abbreviations

AAM  American Association of Museums
AAMV American Association of Museum Volunteers
AGO  Art Gallery of Ontario
ASTC Association of Science and Technology Centers (US)
BAFM British Association of Friends of Museums
BAYSDAYS British Association Youth Section Days
CDT  Craft Design Technology
CSV  Community Service Volunteers
GAGMA Glasgow Art Gallery and Museums Association
ICOM International Council of Museums
TUS  Trade Union Side
UGC  University Grants Committee (UK)
UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation
UFT SCS University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies
WFFM World Federation of Friends of Museums
1

**Making knowledge accessible**

1.1

**Introduction**

The thesis of this book is that volunteers can make an effective and personally fulfilling contribution to museum interpretation and that the support of volunteers can be crucial in releasing the creative energies of hard-pressed, paid museum professionals.

The project from which this book arises was funded by the Nuffield Foundation of the United Kingdom which provided funding for two years (1994–6) to develop a scheme of volunteer interpreters in the Science Museum (London), (part of the National Museum for Science & Industry). It draws, *inter alia*, on work done in the neighbouring institution, the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine in exploring for some 20 years the use of students as tutors and mentors (see Goodlad and Hirst, 1989, 1990; Goodlad 1995a, 1995b). The research on student tutoring has shown the many benefits that can accrue to students, the teachers with whom they work and the school pupils who are tutored; it also points up a number of issues that will need attention as interpretation by volunteers becomes established in museums and science centres. The most important of these is the role of the volunteer manager; for this reason, the Nuffield Science Interpretation Project has concentrated on exploring, by research and practical experiment, the task of managing volunteers.

The idea of museum interpretation by volunteers is a simple one, but one that is complex to put into practice. By bringing together two streams of research and development work, on tutoring by student volunteers and museum interpretation, the book examines principles of good practice and administrative procedures that will be needed whenever volunteers work alongside professionals in enhancing and extending the role of museums. Although the development work undertaken in the project focused on science, the issues discussed are relevant to museum interpretation in other fields too.

In leading towards the analysis of principles of good practice, the chapters that follow cover:
the development of first-person interpretation work in museums;
the development of student tutoring as a form of volunteering;
case studies of exemplary programmes of interpretation by volunteers;
case studies of pilot volunteer programmes in the Science Museum (London).

As a field of discourse, the notion of interpretation (and the multitude of activities that support it) is huge, encompassing theories of child education, adult education, exhibition design, and volunteering. This book, and the project funded by the Nuffield Foundation from which it flows, concentrates on the management of volunteer programmes. Our thesis is that if the management of volunteers is done well, a huge resource of interested, concerned and lively people can help to educate others and simultaneously educate themselves. They can also develop an aspect of our culture with which universities, colleges, schools, museums and science centres are deeply involved—drawing upon, and contributing to, the development of science.

To bring some of the key issues into focus, this first chapter touches on: the nature of interpretation; methods of making complex ideas intelligible; the aims and purposes of volunteering; and the aims of the Nuffield Science Interpretation Project of which this book is a product.

1.2

Museum interpretation: methods of making complex ideas intelligible

The key task of communicators, including those in science, is to locate new ideas in a frame of reference which is familiar and intelligible to the intended audience (see Goodlad, 1996: Chapter 3). We use this process in everyday discourse when we describe or define something. We start by placing the new item in the widest possible category of descriptors and then progressively differentiate it from all other items in that category until its distinguishing, unique or most interesting features are highlighted. (Try defining, for example, milk for someone who has never seen it or consumed it!) The communication of ideas is difficult to achieve through impersonal or mass processes because the communicator does not receive feedback from the person to whom ideas are communicated. By contrast, in a conversation the questions (or bewildered looks) of an interlocutor help the communicator to know when to re-cast the framework, progressively moving back from the particular to the wider frame of reference that resonates with, or has meaning for, the person concerned.

Science is sometimes believed to be more difficult to communicate than other subjects, but this need not necessarily be so. At the macro level, the process of communicating scientific ideas is relatively straightforward. It is not difficult to adduce reasons why we should be interested in science as a human activity (Goodlad, 1973). Modern culture is penetrated at every point by the insights and activities of scientists. Our technology is largely science-based; huge sums of the
money we pay in taxes are used to support scientific research; our very perception of ourselves is largely a product of scientific insight; and so on. Sociologists of science have little difficulty in demonstrating that the subject-matter of scientific enquiry, and indeed its very processes, are deeply interwoven with other ideas and social institutions (see, for example, Ravetz, 1971; Richter, 1973; Barnes and Edge, 1982; Ben-David, 1984; Barnes, 1985; Latour, 1987; Masters, 1993). There are, in short, numerous points of purchase whereby scientific ideas can be interpreted within a framework intelligible to lay people. Nevertheless, those interested in the public understanding of science believe much more needs to be done (Royal Society, 1985), and many difficult questions remain, such as these: Are there any defining features of science? Where should the process of interpretation begin? How does one use the products and appurtenances of scientific enquiry and technological adventuring to create a living experience that will simultaneously fire the imagination of the uninitiated and nourish the thinking of the specialist? Is it, in fact, impossible to do both of these things at once? What helps visitors to understand what they see? Such questions have excited interest for over 60 years (Melton, Feldman, and Mason, 1936) and continue to do so (Serrell, 1990, 1993; Bicknell and Farmelo, 1993).

At the cognitive level, the difficulty of communicating factual information and ideas through museum exhibits is well known: people do not seem to take in or remember much of what they passively see and hear (see Miles, 1987; Uzzell, 1993). Increasingly it is being realised that it is artificial to separate the cognitive and the affective (McManus, 1993), and attention is moving towards the totality of ‘the museum experience’ (Falk and Dierking, 1992). In the fields of science and technology there has been the rapid growth of interactive or ‘hands-on’ science centres. The Science Museum’s Children’s Gallery, developed in the 1930s with ‘push-button’ working models of machines (which was re-developed and re-opened in 1995 as ‘The Basement’—a new suite of galleries, one of which targets a new audience of under-fives), became the inspiration for Frank Oppenheimer’s San Francisco Exploratorium (opened in 1969) which pioneered the use of genuinely interactive exhibits whereby visitors could carry out experiments and see, hear, and feel phenomena directly. The object was, and is, to allow people to find things out for themselves—even by doing things incorrectly (Duensing, 1987:140). In like manner, the Bristol Exploratory is designed, in the words of its founder Richard Gregory, to ‘enrich our everyday perception by providing encounters with surprises’ (Gregory, 1986:18). (Science World, due to open in the year 2000 as part of the Bristol 2000 harbourside development, will replace the Bristol Exploratory.) Over the past 20 years, there has been a huge growth world-wide in this type of science centre (see, for example, Pizzey, 1987, Nuffield Foundation, 1989; Durant, 1992). Some conventional science and technology museums seem torn between their custodial and inspirational functions.

As we show in Chapter Two, differences in emphasis in the main functions of museums have been developing between those museums which concentrate on the collection, preservation and exhibition of important artefacts and those that seek to
promote understanding and enjoyment of the process of science, often by interactive exhibits. Indeed, noting these changing priorities, Hooper-Greenhill (1994:1) has argued that ‘the balance of power in museums is shifting from those who care for objects to include, and often prioritise, those who care for people’. However, to draw a distinction between organisations and institutions with the same objectives but different priorities is artificial and could be damaging.

Every object has a context, a history—a very individual story: it is that story that is the point of contact between the object and the museum visitor. Scientific artefacts only take meaning in context. Expert visitors, who may be scholars in a given field, ‘bring the context with them’. They know what they want to look at, and indeed why they are looking at it. For the lay visitor the situation is very different. One of the Science Museum’s unique strengths lies in the almost inexplicable but inherent human satisfaction of seeing the real thing—the actual Apollo command module that circled the moon; the actual Stephenson Rocket locomotive. But without an insight into the human endeavours of the pioneers of railways or the technology required for a human space mission, these artefacts become mere objects. It is the knowledge surrounding the objects that turns them into museum artefacts. Indeed, Stella Butler has argued (Butler, 1992: Chapter 6) that the significance of artefacts can be conveyed to visitors only if the items are located in particular cognitive frameworks which must themselves be shown to be indivisible from the societies in which they were formed. In order to address the needs of the non-expert a bridge is needed. It is the task of museum curators and exhibit designers to make that bridge, to contextualise the object and tell its personal story (see, for example, Velarde, 1992).

In museums and science centres, first-person interpretation has grown and developed alongside other communication strategies such as the provision of video-clips, tape-slide sequences, telephones, and all the other devices that seek to supply the story. Quin (1990:197) noted the spread of ‘interpreters’ who bridge the gulf between the scientist/exhibit developer and the visitor. Many interpreters have been salaried, but with the current pressure on funding experienced by museums and science centres, it is unlikely that this type of activity can develop to meet visitors’ needs and expectations without some imaginative enhancement of the process.

It is the thesis of this book, building upon and celebrating what has already been achieved, that professionals can amplify their impact by the selective and effective use of volunteers in the process of first-person interpretation.

1.3 Some aims and purposes of volunteering

More and more people are discovering the satisfaction of deploying their knowledge not only for economic gain but also for the sheer satisfaction to be had through the social contact and enhanced awareness that can flow from volunteer activity. This is a phenomenon to be welcomed and celebrated. In 1977, Fred Hirsch, in his seminal book The Social Limits to Growth, pointed not only to the