

An educated guess

Colin MaConnachie reflects on combining the roles of Head of Interpretation and Education.

One of the questions I dread most is “What exactly is the difference between Education and Interpretation – surely they are the same thing?” Conversely, I am often asked, “How can you be head of both Education and Interpretation – surely those are two separate full time jobs?” Certainly in many comparable organisations this is the case – I can think of one example where Interpretation, Education and Living History all have independent managers on independent salaries!

So is it because I work for a charity that needs to save salary costs that I find myself having responsibility for both Education and Interpretation, as well as having a strategic input into many other areas? Possibly. In the course of my working day I am certainly conscious that I deal with two quite distinct client groups in the Education and the Interpretation communities, and my email in-box seems to have twice as many messages as my counterparts elsewhere. But perhaps it is not simply a cost saving device that finds us in this position. During one of our many recent organisational reviews it was suggested that Education and Interpretation should relocate into two different divisions, with Interpretation being allocated to Marketing and Enterprises, the logic being that Interpretation was a useful visitor management tool. Interestingly, the changes never happened. There was considerable opposition to the proposal within the organisation and I did not have to organise any protest campaigns – the commonly held belief was that Interpretation was an integral part of Education, and this core support may be a major factor in making our current approach workable. Despite the fact that my workload would have halved I felt the right decision had been made.

I believe that one premise is core to our activities: every visitor to a Trust property will probably have an educative experience of some sort – what really matters is the quality of that experience. A school group studying the Victorians will have quite clear learning objectives when they visit the David Livingstone Centre and the support offered by Trust staff during the visit should help them meet these objectives. A family visiting Culzean Castle at the weekend may not be going for educational reasons but there will be many times during the course of the day when learning opportunities are available.

One of these will be when they encounter the room stewards in the Castle. This group of unsung heroes are both inspirational as well as informative and can make a major contribution to the “feel good” factor of a visit. Most education at Trust properties is delivered by this huge cohort of permanent, seasonal and volunteer guides – they are the most common interface with our visitors. Are they educators or interpreters? It

doesn't really matter! What does matter is that they are informed, properly trained and valued by the organisation. The Education department has a role to play here – customer care training is vital and guides must be trained and supported in how they deal with learners and visitors of all ages. The Education department also has a role to play in areas such as guidebooks and web presence and many argue that Education is the most powerful conservation tool. So suddenly Education becomes a key part of the organisation. No bad thing – some would say. South of the border The National Trust has recently and very publicly promoted its education programme by putting Learning at the heart of all of its activities.

The term Learning may well be more appropriate for the activities which we currently describe as Interpretation and Education. Learning and Access might be even more appropriate, but looking after physical access would expand the activities of an already overstretched department. What is of prime importance is the quality of the learning opportunities on offer. The Trust has recognised that it must invest in a programme to upgrade its interpretation, and that through its education programme youngsters gain an early insight into conservation. It must also ensure that its resources are accessible to learners of all ages, abilities and backgrounds.

Is it feasible for one small department to manage such a range of diverse activities? Is it even desirable? I would argue that the ability to have an overview of all of our learning activities outweighs the difficulties. Visions are often clearer when held by one person or group. It remains to be seen how sustainable this approach will be as we strive to turn those visions into reality.

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Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire
William Butler Yeats