

Education or interpretation

Work at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh has made Ian Edwards question easy distinctions between the two.

I thought it would be relatively easy to write a piece about the difference between interpretation and education. Interpretation is site-specific: you interpret the significance of a place, the value of a collection, the stories that lurk beneath the surface of an important site or building. Education is broader: you educate learners to make them aware of issues, concepts, and ideas as well as factual information. Good interpretation can and should involve a dialogue in which the audience can pose questions and have them answered. Good education should be even more interactive or open ended, with learners discovering their own solutions to problems and developing their own ideas, opinions and perspectives.

So far so good. But then I looked at the work we are currently doing at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) to revise our interpretation master plan – now three years old and due for a good overhaul. I began to doubt whether the logical division I have just applied really works. In the original plan we had six content-based topics: conservation, evolution and adaptation, classification, plant uses, Scottish plants, and home gardening. All on-site interpretation has been linked to one or more of these areas.

In revising the plan we have decided that we need to go one step further back. The next version of our Interpretation Masterplan will set out three main themes:

- What is biodiversity, why is it important and what is happening to it?
- What are we, the National Botanic Gardens of Scotland doing to protect and conserve biodiversity?
- What changes can our visitors make within their own lives to support the conservation of biodiversity?

The second of these themes will be linked closely to our four gardens, the staff that work in them and the international partners with whom they collaborate. But the first, seen as an essential starting point considering most people in the country still are unsure of what the word biodiversity means, is not site specific at all. So is it an interpretive or an educational objective?

Others must encounter similar problems all the time. We must make interpretation relevant to our visitors and we are told to start from where they are at. However, this is going to require some basic education to increase awareness and understanding of the underlying concepts, in our case the diversity and fragility of life, before talking about the significance of our collections and expertise.

Opportunities for more formal learning at RBGE include PhD, MSc, MA, undergraduate and HND programmes, as well as primary and secondary school visits, outreach 'roadshows' and teacher training workshops. There are adult education classes from basket making to a nationally recognised certificate in horticulture.

The really exciting and, for us, relatively new challenge is the gap between people who sign up for classes on the one hand, and casual visitors on the other who come to the much loved Botanics for leisure, recreation or just peace and quiet. How can we turn attendees into audiences? Baby walkers and bird feeders into "biodiversitists"?

This is where on-site interpretation becomes crucial. Interpretation involves 'education by stealth' - the subtle art of educating people who didn't come to learn but are seeking a day out or even trying to get away from people wanting to sell them things or influence their behaviour!

Recent live interpretation sessions have shown very clearly how different people respond to the idea of participating in a learning experience. Encountering our volunteer Garden Rangers providing an impromptu demonstration on orchids, Scottish wild plants, or ferns and fossils some visitors are happy to engage for five or ten minutes in a lively discussion; others make a wide detour to avoid any contact.

So perhaps where an individual event or activity sits on the education-interpretation spectrum depends in part on the aspirations and interests of the audiences, rather than the methodology or media. Education is for those who come specifically to learn, and they will normally be expected to contribute something to make the experience more worthwhile. Interpretation can be something people actively seek out, but more typically it is something they chance upon. It is up to the individual to decide if they want to take an interest, ignore it, or 'come back later'.

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Creativity is a type of learning process where the teacher and pupil are located in the same individual.

Arthur Koestler