

## Pushing the limits?

Susan Cross reflects on training interpreters

*'Interpretation is an art... Any art is in some degree teachable.'*  
*Freeman Tilden, Interpreting our heritage*

Over the last twenty years I have spent a considerable amount of time training interpreters. I deliver training on writing for interpretation, evaluating interpretation, interpretive planning, and working with designers. My aim in all of this, like a lot of interpreters' efforts, is shamelessly idealistic and hopelessly unrealistic. I want to equip people to inspire and delight their public. I want to unleash their passion for the beautiful fragility of the natural world or the magnificent emotional saga of human history and turn them into charismatic, skilled, and imaginative communicators.

Do I succeed? To a certain extent. After years of practice, review and determined effort to pass on interpretive skills I recognise that there are limitations on what training can achieve.

To start with, some aspects of interpretation are simply more teachable than others. There are processes and understanding that underpin interpretive practice and lead to better interpretive solutions. If we want to maintain and raise professional standards, we must deliver training in those. Interpreters need to understand (among other things) how people learn; what motivates leisure visits to countryside and heritage sites; how to recognise a good story and sum up a good message; how to use a range of evaluation techniques; how to think strategically and how to write a good interpretive plan.

But they need other stuff too; stuff that is harder to teach and can perhaps only be encouraged. The best interpreters, the sort I would like us all to be, don't simply follow the guidelines, they also have what I call 'creative courage', often linked to a sense of adventure and a spirit of fun. They love the places or objects they work with and they love people. They are artists and, like other artists, they work with the tools and techniques someone like me can teach them but they do it in their own way, adding their own inspiration and flair.

People on my courses often ask how they can inspire their visitors. After years of experience, all I can say to them is, be as conscious and open as you can about what inspires you. And this cannot be taught. People do it in a range of ways from the big and brash to the small and quiet. It seems, so long as they do it with integrity, that it works. Poet John Moat said, 'the quality of the writing depends on the quality of the life'. I think it is similar with interpretation: the quality of the interpretation depends on the quality of the love. I can teach tools and techniques and knowledge but I can't teach love.

That, of course, doesn't stop me trying to prod it into life. So on my training courses I advocate inventiveness, creativity, doing what feels right and being inspired. People regularly leave with more than tools and techniques; some also have exciting new ideas, a gleam in their eye and a spring in their step.

Back they go, these people with the potential to be good interpreters, many of them heading for disappointment, frustration and the second great limitation of interpretation training. They return to their organisations equipped with new understanding, determined to make a difference. But their organisations, it seems, are often not receptive to this enthusiasm. I regularly hear of bosses who will not believe that 150 well chosen words on a panel are better than 450 words from the management plan, or that it is worth paying for bespoke illustrations, or that a high quality installation will convey a sense of place.

All training can do is give people skills and knowledge. Good interpreters add a spark of creativity and have the potential to do great work. They need encouragement and support to nurture that potential and until we start equipping managers to play their part some of our training effort will be wasted. As a trainer, I am frustrated that I do not reach the right people. I rarely see the people who manage interpreters, and who therefore control the quality and effectiveness of interpretation. The next challenge for interpretive training is clear.

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You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him discover it in himself.

*Galileo Galilei*