

Interpretation's real potential

Genevieve Adkins looks at the road ahead for interpretation.

This year sees a major international interpretation conference in the UK. The Vital Spark will bring together interpreters from around the globe to share and celebrate their work and debate the future of interpretation.

But why is this happening now? An easy answer is that Scotland is celebrating the people, culture and heritage of the Scottish Highlands in its Year of Highland Culture, and that The Vital Spark is part of this. In reality the picture may be more complex.

The UK's political landscape has changed dramatically over the past decade. A Labour government, a devolved Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly have all put domestic issues firmly on the political agenda. At the same time, recognition of the UK's creative economy and the links between economic growth, opportunity and social mobility (supported by informal and lifelong learning) have all created openings for interpreters to play a vital role in the changing political and economic landscape. New interpretive posts and teams have been created whose work is dedicated to creating and delivering experiences and environments targeted at achieving organisational objectives and government policy, and interpretive thinking and practices are being integrated into the work of staff, managers and curators.

What does all this additional capacity mean? Without question interpretation is better recognised by many public agencies, organisations and museums than ever before. And interpreters are taking on an ever broadening range of responsibilities – from writing copy for exhibitions, to project managing multi-million pound projects.

But what is being achieved? It is not possible to attribute the same achievements to all organisations, as no two have adopted interpretation in the same way. Two English organisations make interesting case studies. Both have embraced interpretation and put visitors at the heart of their planning and activities: they are now reaping the rewards.

Historic Royal Palaces (HRP), which manages sites such as Hampton Court Palace and The Tower of London, is transforming itself. Reaching beyond its Royal associations the organisation now presents the palaces as places where history took place. 'History where it happened' makes the link between the monarchs, people and society to tell the human stories that lie behind the events of the past. And putting storytelling at the heart of its activities has reaped rewards. Visitor numbers to the palaces have increased by 16% between 2005-06 and 2006-07.

At the Victoria and Albert Museum (the V&A) in London the Head of Interpretation is responsible for informal gallery learning along with audience research – placing visitor studies central to the ongoing development of the galleries, thus ensuring they are as relevant, appropriate and accessible as possible.

Interpretation has become part of the culture of these organisations, central to objective setting, resource planning and achieving outcomes.

Scotland too evidences many good examples of interpretation, a legacy of its long engagement with the discipline. But it could be argued that whilst projects are strong on interpretive planning, many organisations have yet to exploit its full potential.

A change that is needed is for organisations fully to embrace both education and interpretation as tools to deliver wider agendas. Interpretation is an informal learning discipline; it seeks to provoke, reveal and relate. It is not education but, I would argue, a far more persuasive form of communication able to impart knowledge and affect beliefs and behaviour. There can be no doubt that organisations need to educate people; but interpretation casts a broader net. The data proves this. In 2005-06 HRP welcomed 145,382 education visits but 2,508,000 visitors; the V&A 128,000 and 2,196,000; and Historic Scotland 71,000 and 3,100,000 (2006-07 figures). This pattern is reflected across the museum and heritage sectors and strongly suggests that a review of strategic priorities is called for.

So what does this all mean? It means interpreters and organisations recognising the full creative potential of interpretation. Interpretation puts assets, knowledge and resource management at the heart of organisational culture, creating intuitive structures and creating genuine and inspiring experiences which staff are proud to be part of, organisations are proud of and the public enjoys visiting. Self-belief breeds organisational confidence, which translates into market confidence and commercial success.

The recipe for real success is there; the challenge is to train the cooks!

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