

Letters

Dear Editor

Can criticise – won't criticise

Interpreters are very critical people. Can you ever look at a panel or an exhibition or join a guided walk with your critical faculties switched off? For us any visit is beset by the myriad questions – 'how would I have done this? why does this work? what's good here?' Followed up by a critical assessment and discussion with family, friends and colleagues. Everybody does it.

So why don't we dare to do it publicly? There is much good interpretation in Scotland and we are rightly proud of this and praise ourselves for the quality and innovation through Interpret Scotland and elsewhere. But are we in danger of being complacent? In the middle of the cosy back slapping and mutual support, shouldn't there be some honesty? A bit of truthful, if painful, constructive criticism might be beneficial sometimes.

We offer several good reasons why we don't do it:

- Interpretation as we think of it is a small profession. We need the support of like-minded colleagues, and therefore can't risk upsetting any of them.
- Much of what has been achieved has been through partnership, agency working with agency and consultancy. Who would risk blowing the fragile framework of these partnerships apart by publicly stating that so and so's project was a waste of time, space and money?
- What consultant would risk future contracts by speaking out? Loose cannons have their uses, but we all need to earn a living.
- If criticism is handled badly, where does it rebound? Towards those who dared to stick their head above the parapet.
- How can we really comment without seeing the interpretive plan, its goals and themes?

In October 2002 Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park staff at the new Gateway Centre in Balloch welcomed members of the Scottish Interpretation Network. They gave an open, honest account of the interpretation in the centre. As a lecturer in Interpretation Kev subsequently returned with a group of students, looking at evaluation and interpretive planning. Both visits confirmed criticisms that LLTNP staff had previously discovered through their much more comprehensive evaluation. These critical comments from SIN and the students cannot change the interpretation, so you could argue that it was a pointless exercise, yet we feel that by being honest and openly accepting comment, the National Park are aware that something is not right and prepared to admit that, and are sharing and learning this with us.

Interpret Scotland itself could be regarded as part of the same problem. It is an excellent publication, well produced and flagging up some of the best practice and positive news in interpretation. But how about some humility – where are the articles saying 'we tried something new, it was a good idea but it didn't quite work'? 'We are still making the same mistake – what can we do to about it?' We learn more from our mistakes than anything else, but only if we get the feedback, only if we know it doesn't work and can assess why and consider how to improve. As a lecturer and professional working in interpretation we are always looking for examples of good and bad interpretation. So who will volunteer to put something up for honest discussion not just polite praise?

Let us end with Kev sharing a story about his recent holiday in Lewis: 'Amongst all the good interpretation I saw a small exhibition with dense text, undifferentiated layout and mounted on boards that swayed in the breeze so it was very difficult to focus on. Did I out of honesty and as a favour point this out to the staff? Sorry to say, I'm a coward as well and kept my head down below the parapet.'

Kev Theaker and Hugh Muschamp
Scottish Interpretation Network
www.scotinterpnet.org.uk

Editor's note

The last edition of Interpret Scotland did carry an honest and open article about the pros and cons of the use of IT media for interpretation at the National Park Gateway Centre. We also evaluated this journal through a readers' questionnaire and printed a summary of the results. That said, it is quite right that we learn more from our mistakes, and there is a case for the journal explicitly presenting examples of bad practice. Any volunteers?

**"In my childhood we were assured that the brain was 'like a telephone switchboard' Freud compared the brain to hydraulic and electro-magnetic systems. Leibniz compared it to a mill and some ancient Greeks thought it worked a bit like a catapult. We see it as a computer."
John R. Searle in 'Minds, Brains and Science', (p44)**