

## **"I'm told I'm no good, so I'm gonna prove it..."**

Bringing about behavioural change can be one of the most difficult challenges for interpretation, especially where vandalism is concerned.

How can interpreters tackle vandalism before it overwhelms us, destroying months of work and morale? Only by understanding its root causes and employing appropriate interpretive tools.

### **What does this mean in practice?**

Interpretive provision (panels, displays etc.) that are a potential target for vandalism needs to accommodate young people's needs. The best solution is to get local youngsters involved in designing their own 'messages' in their own way. Given them their own space to genuinely value what they do, encourage them to exhibit their ideas, and they will ensure that it is imaginative! Set-up events and provide them with publicity outlets which celebrate their contributions.

If you feel that's over-the-top, count the cost of 'year on year' repairs to vandalised facilities and you may find the books balance in a surprising way.

### **Why do the kids vandalise?**

Vandalism is often about personal psychology, and to counter this we need to relate to their experience of negative role models, rejection, low self value etc. Often their personal creativity has been dismissed and their friendships based on peer power and peer provings .... I can ruin this display really well, or more sophisticatedly: my graphic logo means get off my patch .....

The individual is often unaware of the burden of his/her background ... all that matters is personal action and reaction . Their destructive behaviour can come from:

- A need to prove something – to themselves and others
- A need for peer acceptance through creating a local power base as a 'leader' of the gang (in the absence of a positive model)
- As a teenager, feeling resentful towards adults and 'their world' in an attempt to fill the gap remaining from a lack of affection when very young (broken families etc.)
- An 'I've been told I'm no good so I'll prove it' attitude

These destructive behaviours can be diverted into positive energy by ensuring any interpretation it provokes rather than instructs:

- Provide a graffiti wall, a bike track, an adventure tree walkway or play ball area
- Use 'peer pressure' techniques by running challenge days, 'obstacle courses' etc.
- Run specialised youth events, organised not by staff, but by volunteers, preferably from or related to the target group

## What about us?

Our relationship to the vandal says as much about them as it does about us. If we can relate to the world through their eyes we might better understand their problems and attitudes. Staff worn down by vandalising kids can hardly be expected to suddenly start 'empathising' with them - locking them up maybe closer to some rangers' true desires! However, its exactly this mutual antagonism that breeds the problem ... its a circle that must - and can - be broken.

Front line staff may need help and support if they recognise any of the following feelings when their interpretation is destroyed by vandals. Viz: threatened personal status, prejudice, inability to understand, frustration, personal fear etc. The irony is that many young kids feel very similar things ...

## Practical steps

These practical steps suggest ways in which you can tackle vandalism through interpretation:

- Offer rewards for achievement when involving young people in tasks on site. Observe their reaction as you change the rewards from 'things' to 'concepts'. An example of this comes for an urban park in Warrington where the Ranger Helpers (local youngsters) collected 'Finch Awards' (small certificates) for positive activities in the Park. This then led some of the kids into gardening, supervision of other school groups, guided walks etc. I also watched them stop motor bikes passing through the park !!
- Keep track of the addresses of participants in 'anti-vandal' programmes. Use 'reformed' vandals to reach others. This is about getting inside the peer group process, which is only possible by using the kids themselves to untangle their own 'webs'
- Slowly introduce (non precious) artefacts into the site/centre free of security. This is best done during an anti-vandal programme over a 4-6 week period. Measure the theft rates.
- Items can be replaced so as to reduce the vandal's 'value added'. An example; the simple photocopied notice (costs 20p !!) which is pinned onto a post, inside a plastic sleeve. 'Added value' is about vandals wanting their negative impact to be noticed, even to be caught! Clearly nicking a plastic wallet costing 20p has no added value !!
- Don't fight them, make your displays more open ... not more closed. Take way the ropes and barriers where a display is in context, to reduce the feeling of authority power. This is especially useful in green spaces, but also applies to displays and exhibitions. I don't advocate abandoning caution, I'm only suggesting reducing the 'power targets' .... authority, precious values, barriers, symbols of middle class respectability etc.

This psychology is based on quietly repairing the vandal's activities, time after time, without comment, without publicity, and without 'kudos' accruing to the 'damage' and thereby to the vandal.

### **Case study – (this project has put many of these principles into action)**

Camley Street Natural Park behind Kings Cross Station (London) was 'born' from a rubbish tip 15 years ago !! It uses every anti-vandal strategy going including:

- touch it displays without any glass
- free flow throughout the park
- close collaboration with every school within 10 miles
- most of the material in the centre and class room is created by the kids who use the park
- the opening hours are matched to local people's needs and some availability slots especially for youth groups
- there are loads of activities for young people from ages 5 to 20, and also for 'adults' !!
- the centre becomes a social club for community events and festivals
- displays are well used. Ex: the kids wore out my food webs display by playing the inter-connections (made from car seat belts) so much that the mechanisms disintegrated after 6 years !!
- local kids and other groups have been involved in countering the sequence of formal threats to destroy the park (various Kings Cross Development proposals) over the past 8 years ...
- wildlife and gardening groups have always been part of local involvement, these are usually formed from the local kids and from contacts in visiting school groups. A youth forum has existed and young people have gone on to formal employment after this career introduction.

The process described above is easily transferrable. Camley Street has experienced almost zero vandalism over its entire lifetime.

Doug Gleave has been an exhibition designer employing psychological techniques to create 'vandal-defeating' exhibits for the past 15 years. He is now a consultant and trainer.

**"If it is true that words have meanings, why don't we throw away the words and keep just the meanings?"**

**Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosopher, (1889–1951)**