

AHI article (Spring 2016): Reporting research I

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This article forms part of a regular feature within the Journal and attempts to summarise the research undertaken and some of the key results and conclusions emanating from recently published studies relevant to the field of interpretation. In this article two studies are briefly explored, they both relate to the development and application of a narrative for use with a personal or digital guide.

Quinn & Ryan (2016) explored the role of the tour guide in managing the experience at a heritage site (Dublin Castle, Ireland) where the content of the narrative which was being delivered was likely to be challenging for some visitors. Participant observation followed by semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to experience a number of on-site tours and thus observe how the narrative unfolded on each tour. Notes were made on narrative detail, verbal emphases, exchanges between the tour guide and their visitors as well as the general behaviour and engagement of visitors. Interviews were then used to explore the development and content of the narrative itself. It was noted that the narrative should ideally be kept to 45 minutes in duration. The results identified four key story lines running through each narrative, namely: 'social significance'; 'centre of wealth'; 'centre of power' and 'the Irish state' (Table 1, p329). Based upon these four story lines, the results revealed a series of key historical points which were covered and that the historical role of the castle itself was largely 'depoliticized by the Guides' (p330) which resulted in a 'sensitive, yet flexible' storyline (p334). Although, interviews revealed that the Guides were sometimes 'more sensitive to the storyline' than was necessary given the visitors prior knowledge (p331), indeed this heterogeneity meant that the visitors were typically making sense of the narrative from their own perspectives (p333) and thus the importance of 'playing host', detailed scene setting and the use of cues to gauge interest were all identified as critically important tools for these Guides. The encouragement of visitors who were able to share their 'expert' knowledge on architecture, art and the like was commonly welcomed (p332). The unintentional tension between visitors and international tourists based upon a lack of knowledge and understanding of what the narrative was attempting to convey (p331) occasionally emerged during a tour and required the Guide to manage a difficult situation. In conclusion, the role of the Guide was summarised as being to provide a 'contemporary re-working and re-inventing' of the narrative particularly where 'memories evoked could be highly emotive' (p335).

Bohlin & Brandt (2014) also looked at the guide narrative but in relation to digital guides produced at four heritage sites in Sweden. The four locations were: Falun nr. Stockholm (a World Heritage site); the old industrial town of Avesta; Molndals Museum, outside Gothenburg and Vitlycke World Heritage site, north of Gothenburg. The research analysed the content of the narratives used in each of the digital guides in relation to four dimensions: 'meta-narrative'; 'power structure'; 'authenticity' and 'interpretation' (p6) through the observation of visitors, transcription and a qualitative text analysis. The way in which each of these dimensions was presented through the guide itself was also analysed. The results suggested a linear view of the historical development of each site was commonly adopted (p10) and whilst the narrative in some guides focused on people or even individuals; in others, the site and its wider influence provided the focus (p13). It was also noted that some sites had multiple stories available for their visitors; others did not, although work was ongoing to develop stories for different audiences. Authenticity came across strongly and was well grounded in the stories being used typically through a 'direct interaction with the artefacts' (p11). In terms of interpretation, evidence for 'provocation', 'relating', 'revealing' and 'embodiment' were sought and explored (p13). It was noted that the narrative content had been written to engage with visitors but that all of the guides suffered in part from a lack of direct linkage between the narrative and the view or object (p11). It was therefore suggested that the developer must know what can be seen on the site at each main point in the narrative's storyline. The findings broadly suggested that the narrative at a particular location should be limited to three minutes but that movement at the location should be encouraged and could be used to extend the stay (p12). In conclusion, the study recommended that the digital guide should include 10 stops and last ideally 30 minutes but that this could be extended to 40-45 minutes (p12). For visitors, being able to replay or fast forward elements of the narrative was also identified as being valuable. Co-creation with visitors was also mentioned with the idea of them asking questions and contributing to changes or amendments to the narrative which it was suggested could provide a basis for a 'range of alternative and tailor-made narratives' (p14).

(812 words)

References

- Bohlin, M. & Brandt, D. (2014). Creating tourist experiences by interpreting places using digital guides. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 9(1), 1-17.
- Quinn, B. & Ryan, T. (2016). Tour guides and the mediation of difficult memories: the case of Dublin Castle, Ireland. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 19(4), 322-337.