

AHI article (Autumn 2016): Reporting research 2

This article forms part of a regular feature within the Journal and attempts to summarise current research and some of the key results and conclusions emanating from recently published studies relevant to the field of interpretation. In this article a recent study focusing upon the training needs of guides is briefly explored with the results being discussed with reference to older, but related studies.

The challenge for any organisation offering guided interpretive activities is keeping their guides up to date not only with the resource itself but also in the techniques of interpretation as well as the broader aspects of their role. Indeed, over the last twenty years, numerous studies have focused upon the training needs of guides in terms of their personal and professional development as well as their on-site role. The research conducted has also offered a commentary on the value and nature of in-house skills training, the alternatives of using external courses, accreditation and certification schemes as well as experienced consultants, trainers or managers from other organisations.

This article reports on a recent study by Yamada (2014) focusing upon the training needs of guides in Japan. Its results are compared with other studies, including the work of Weiler & Walker (2014), Christie & Mason (2003), Weiler & Ham (2002) and Ballantyne & Hughes (2001).

Yamada (2014) initially interviewed 24 guides, coded the responses and used the resulting data to inform the design of a questionnaire which was completed by 54 guides in Japan. A 5-point Likert scale was used, where 'want to learn very much' (scored 5) and 'do not want to learn at all' (scored 1). The resulting data identified the top responses for the future training needs of these guides as; 'the management of interpretation' ($x=4.70$), 'understanding the audience' ($x=4.67$), 'enhancing interpersonal relations' ($x=4.65$), 'improving communication skills' ($x=4.61$), 'design of guided walks' and 'evaluation of interpretation' ($x=4.57$), 'risk management' ($x=4.44$) and 'an improved knowledge of the resource' ($x=4.15$). These responses closely aligned with the work of Weiler & Walker (2014) who also asked about areas requiring support, for the 68 guides who participated in their training programme in Tonga, 'enhancements to the interpretive experience' was mentioned by 57%, 'risk management' by 50% and 'improved interaction' by 18%.

Ballantyne & Hughes (2001) used a pre and post-training questionnaire on 65 ecotour guides in Queensland, WA, when asked about the role of the guide, the responses (based upon a 5-point Likert scale) revealed 'programme content' ($x=4.7$), 'audience awareness' ($x=4.6$) and 'use of interpretive techniques' ($x=3.5$) as the key priorities. Christie & Mason (2003) commented specifically upon the importance of guides understanding the 'varied needs of their audience' (p11) but also in discussing the role of the guide in detail, they suggested that they are there to

'facilitate learning as well as to entertain' (p9) indeed they suggested that a good guide should encourage their audience 'to see the world differently' (p9).

A further element of Yamada's research (2014) focused upon the main problems guides encountered whilst delivering their activities, 39 guides responding to this question. A 5-point Likert scale was again used with 5 being 'very problematic' and 1 'not at all problematic'. The most common responses were; 'insufficient opportunities for evaluation' ($x=4.11$), 'a lack of experience from other sites' / 'lack of interaction with other interpreters' ($x=3.97$ & 3.84 respectively), 'lack of research on the resources to be interpreted' ($x=3.61$), 'insufficient training' ($x=3.61$) and 'lack of feedback' ($x=3.47$). Some of the actual comments recorded included:

'I'm working alone' and 'I don't get to experience interpreters outside of this site' (p49);

'I don't know how to evaluate the effects of my interpretation ... so I haven't evaluated' (p49);

and also:

'I wish someone would take the time to give me feedback on my daily performances' (p54).

Understanding how to evaluate is vitally important, Christie & Mason (2003) talk about the skill of 'critical reflection' (p12) which when undertaken in a supportive way, they suggest can be hugely beneficial to the personal and professional development of the guide. They explain that it should be conducted using a journal or note taking, through the use of case studies, external consultants and trainers or, through group discussion (p13).

Ballantyne & Hughes (2001) asked their ecotour guides to identify any areas requiring further development, 90% identified at least one skills weakness in 'interpretive techniques', 28% in 'subject knowledge' and 15% in 'audience awareness' (p6). Some of the specific responses included; 'encouraging visitors to interact with each other' (40%), 'involving visitors through the use of questions' (23%), 'using models and diagrams' (23%), 'public speaking and communication skills' (18%), 'developing themes for tour content' (9%), 'using props and/or technology' (6%) and 'interacting with visitors from other cultures' (6%) (p6). The questionnaire of Yamada (2014) also explored broader subject areas and skills which their guides felt would be useful, five broad categories emerged, namely 'product knowledge', 'interpretive skills', 'understanding of audiences', 'supplemental skills' and 'miscellaneous' (p49). Supplemental skills included 'managerial skills' (13%), 'risk management' (7.4%), 'problem solving' (7.4%) and 'ethics' (5.6%). The 'interpretive skills' identified included 'better communication skills' (38.9%), 'arts, performance and music' (22.2%), 'broader knowledge of interpretive techniques' (18.5%) and 'public speaking' (18.5%).

In considering the training of guides, Ballantyne & Hughes (2001) recommended that a basic training programme should cover resource-based knowledge, risk management, interpretation techniques and communication skills. They suggested that this resource-based knowledge should be delivered through in-house training but that external agencies and/or consultants should deliver much of the core training associated with interpretive techniques, communication skills, risk management and most importantly of all, evaluation. Christie & Mason (2003) suggested that at the heart of effective interpretive communication lies 'enthusiasm, confidence and good delivery' (p5), they remind us that a training programme should therefore do 'much more than just offer skills development' (p10). To this end, Weiler & Walker (2014) report on their in-house training programme which they developed and which focused upon seven areas of guide practice as listed below:

1. Introduction to tourism (understanding visitors, their expectations and needs from on-site experiences)
2. Tour planning (logical flow, a story with a beginning, middle and end)
3. Interpretive guiding (using the IT-REAL principles)
4. Group management (observation, leadership, non-verbal communications)
5. Sustainability (contemporary perspective and goals – the 'take-home' bit)
6. Resource and site knowledge
7. Risk management, operational skills etc. (p94-95)

They used the acronym "IT-REAL" to remind guides of the key interpretive principles of good guiding, namely; Involving (sensory and active), Thematic, Relevant, Enjoyable (through diversity of experience), Engaging (emotion and empathy), Accurate and Logical (p95).

Looking beyond initial guide training, Weiler & Ham (2002) explored the importance of succession planning through the concept of 'training the trainers', such that individual guides were trained who could then build capacity on site by providing training and development needs for the next generation of trainees. They argued that the benefits of this included providing follow-up training, on-going support for queries and problems as well as establishing longer-term professional development systems through one-to-one mentoring arrangements. They also discussed the advantages of groups of guides being brought together from different locations such that the shared reflection enhanced the learning and development experience. In their study, the trainers were selected based upon a number of criteria including their guiding experience, establishing a diversity of the guide pool in terms of age, gender and location as well as their individual potential as a mentor / trainer (personality, skills, availability) (p63).

Christie & Mason (2003) agreed with this longer-term strategy suggesting that it takes time to develop a good guide, through the careful study of other interpreters in action, the gaining of personal experience and regular training and skills

development (p6). Weiler & Walker (2014) also reinforced the importance of guides experiencing interpretation and interacting with guides at other sites.

The work of the Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI) on the Grundtvig In-Herit Project in collaboration with Interpret Europe will provide a clear set of standards for the interpretive profession from which can easily be derived a set of competencies specifically for guided interpretive activities. It is anticipated that once published, together with the interpretive guide training already being delivered by Interpret Europe, these will lead to the refinement of training materials which should help to inform in-house as well as off-site training for guides. In addition, a best practice guide on the principles of the evaluation of interpretation is being published by the AHI in summer 2016.

(1,405 words)

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