

Interpretations: locating the research study in context

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Introduction:

Interpretations is a timely piece of research not least because of current interest in widening access to the arts generally and gallery education specifically. This interest is reflected in recent policy initiatives, such as *Creative Partnerships* and *Strategic Commissioning*, that recognise the contribution that artists and arts organisations make to young people's development and which have generated practice based research (1). Similarly, the Scottish Arts Council has increasing participation in the arts as one of its three corporate aims and identifies audience development as a key strategy to broaden the range of people who engage in the arts, whilst ensuring that all receive a high quality and positive experience (2).

At the same time audience development and gallery education practice is developing and there is a recognised need from within the sector for research to deepen our understanding and provide evidence of the nature of the engagement between galleries and audiences (3). As has been noted, research-based practice is valuable in a number of ways:

For intrinsic professional reasons, practice that is well informed, carried out on the basis of evidence, is likely to be more satisfying and enduring, as well as effective in reaching its goals. For extrinsic reasons of accountability, marketing and such, it is also likely to be more plausible, justifiable and acceptable.
(Xanthoudaki *et al*, 2003: 3)

Interpretations satisfies a number of the needs identified by policy makers and researcher/practitioners; it is research which emerges from and reflects on practice and it illuminates different approaches to interpretation, whilst drawing attention to potential avenues for further investigation.

Background to the research

Perhaps more than some other research, the commissioning history of *Interpretations* has shaped its structure and findings. It was instigated by the Scottish Arts Council's Audience and Organisational development department and was carried out under the auspices of the National Association for Gallery Education (engage). This cross-over between audience development and gallery education is less common than might be expected and has provided for a rich and complex study. Furthermore *Interpretations* emerged from an earlier scoping study that mapped existing interpretation practice in

contemporary art venues in Scotland and drew attention to areas which would benefit from further research (4). In this way the research stems from existing practice and is focused on an examination of the ways particular interpretation strategies function in galleries. Gallery education and interpretation are themselves multifaceted, organic and reflexive and the case studies which make up *Interpretations* reflect this. Thus the practice under investigation, as well as *Interpretations'* provenance, has influenced the research trajectory. In many ways, the challenges and opportunities faced during the research process reflect those faced by gallery education and interpretation itself.

Interpretations exhibits features and shares findings with other studies conducted within the cultural and visual arts education sector recently (5), but also throws new light on specific activities and draws attention to areas ripe for further investigation. Whereas *enquire*, for example, reflects the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) and the Department for Children Schools and Families' (DCSF, previously the Department for Education and Skills) interest in galleries as a learning resource, and took as its original research question 'what are the conditions for enabling learning in the gallery context?', *Interpretations* has addressed how interpretation strategies can increase access to contemporary art. In this respect *Interpretations* has a remit that includes learning as part of a wider investigation which considers the multifaceted ways visitors can potentially interact with the gallery. Equally *Interpretations* can be differentiated from market research studies that interrogate what people think or feel about a particular experience or product through large scale quantitative research. By identifying four case studies as the parameters for the study, *Interpretations* provides an in-depth analysis of a small number of cases as opposed to a necessarily more superficial investigation of greater numbers. Additionally, by adopting action research as its research methodology *Interpretations* has embraced the professional development of participating gallery staff as well as interrogating education and audience development.

Interrogating 'interpretation'

As the title of the study makes clear, the focus of this research is 'interpretation' within galleries. Interpretation is, however, a complex term and it is worth considering what it can mean and why it is of increasing significance in museums and galleries. It is also useful to tease out differences and overlaps between interpretation, education, marketing and how they contribute to audience development.

So what are the characteristics of interpretation practice? Maureen Michael identifies in the *Interpretations* report that ‘the practice of interpretation weaves threads of audience development, curatorship, marketing, education and art criticism into an intricate pattern of possibilities’ (p.10). A similarly all-encompassing description is given of audience development by the Scottish Arts Council who see it as;

A planned and targeted management process which involves programming, education and marketing (underpinned by research and evaluation) working together to deliver an organisation’s overall aims. (6)

This suggests that interpretation and audience development are indistinguishable. However, in some larger institutions interpretation is understood to encompass in-gallery resources – captions and panels, interactive devices and audio tours that relate to exhibitions and displays. Here it is differentiated from education activities, which are seen to involve more direct face-to-face interaction with specific groups. In slight contrast, the task of marketing tends more toward the development and promotion of the cultural institution. Yet common to all is a concern to foster visitor engagement and offer ways of mediating between the art and the public.

Galleries typically adopt various modes of communication which arguably work more or less effectively with different groups. For example, Hooper-Greenhill (1994) considers that exhibitions, displays, labels and catalogues communicate constructively to existing visitors who are already familiar with customary codes and behaviours. However, more reflexive and personalised modes of communication that can respond to audience needs are necessary to attract and support novice gallery goers (7). Evidence of these varied strategies can be found in galleries across Scotland (8). Furthermore, the individual case studies within *Interpretations* reveal blurred boundaries between the varied ways galleries seek to engage with their visitors. Therefore, whilst it is important to note the differences between the aspirations of, for example, education and marketing *Interpretations’* findings indicate that each contribute to visitors’ ability to connect with and learn from the gallery. Indeed Silverman (2002) argues that even the broadest definitions of ‘learning’ are too narrow to accommodate the range of visitor experiences and that alternative conceptions of engagement are needed. Favouring the more holistic notion of meaning making she draws attention to the potential for museums to change people’s lives by enabling them to actively construct meaning. This inclusive construction appears relevant in the context of *Interpretations’* motivation to aid visitors’

meaning making through facilitating intellectual access and encouraging active involvement (9).

At the heart of interpretation is the construction of the gallery as a whole as a means of communication. This in turn reflects a number of factors. There is a shift away from understanding education as limited to taught sessions for specific groups to acknowledging that galleries have a broad pedagogic purpose. In some respects this echoes the historic construction of galleries as establishments whose function was to enable individuals to educate themselves (10). Therefore, although meeting resistance from some in the cultural sector (11), facilitating learning and audience engagement is increasingly being recognised as a central component shaping museums' and galleries' overall policies and objectives.

Changes in gallery policy since the 1970s toward greater inclusiveness have also been equated with shifting theoretical perceptions of the institution. There is increasing awareness of galleries' status as cultural institutions and a growing recognition that galleries 'represent' and define society and people. This has prompted a move to challenge dominant discourses and highlight the work of those not traditionally recognised. Issues of cultural representation inform gallery practice. For example, feminist art historians have challenged women's omission from art history, whilst more recently there have been attempts by disabled curators and artists to highlight the absence of work made by, or positively representing, disabled individuals within museums and galleries (12).

These shifts toward greater accessibility have been ascribed to 'developments in critical theory...that seek to include and empower previously marginalised or excluded voices' (13). This translates into gallery policies which include visitors' voices. For example, gallery educators have invited visitors to write their own interpretive labels, which are placed alongside curators' comments. Collaborative curation of exhibitions with those from beyond the gallery is another intervention adopted by museum and gallery professionals keen to engage in more accessible forms of cultural creation and interpretation (14). As noted above, there has also been political pressure on cultural institutions to become more accessible and accountable, which has prompted the gathering of information on who visits and why. Hence from the mid 1980s audience

research addressing visitors' experiences emerged as a dominant concern within the museum and gallery field.

The desire by galleries to prioritise the learner's experience within museum and gallery practice and research has also been attributed to changes in our understanding of how and why people learn. In recent years there has been a move away from understanding teaching as the transmission of knowledge by teacher to students. Instead, learners are seen as active constructors of meaning and the teacher (or educator) takes a more facilitative stance, engaging students in the processes of learning. Particularly within gallery education, there is a focus on dialogic pedagogy wherein meaning is generated through a negotiated process between art work, learner and educator. This approach recognises the knowledge and experience learners bring to the experience and hence requires educators (and the institution more widely) to work more collaboratively with visitors.

Acknowledging visitors' expertise has shaped the research agenda. In the first instance visitor studies, involving the gathering of statistical data on peoples' behaviour underpinned the majority of research into museums and galleries. More recently, recognition of the limits of this research model (particularly its inability to account for how individuals construct meaning within the museum) has encouraged more ethnographic approaches that explore visitors' interpretive processes and learning experiences (15).

Finally, the drive toward greater accessibility within galleries is partly attributable to financial pressure, as reductions in government funding (particularly in the 1980s) encouraged cultural institutions to adopt a business model and seek funding from a range of sources. Nowadays museums and galleries operate within the context of the leisure industry and can be seen to function as visitor attraction, as well as repositories of art. As a result they must 'keep a balance between being a place of learning and knowledge and a place of enjoyment' (16). Cultural institutions need to increase audience numbers, hence the need for effective marketing, and must strive to provide enjoyable experiences. This has shifted priorities and focused attention on issues such as audience satisfaction and 'visit quality'.

How does interpretation function; connections between research and practice

In the mapping exercise commissioned prior to *Interpretations*, Heather Lynch identifies existing forms of interpretation in selected Scottish galleries that range from text-based forms, such as wall labels and leaflets, to more interactive modes including gallery tours and workshops. These different approaches reflect particular conceptions of communication and meaning making strategies. More transmissive models identify a source (an exhibit for example), a transmitter (a label, for example) and a receiver (the viewer). Here communication is constructed as a relatively simple transfer of information, from an active source to a passive receiver. Yet as has been recognised, communication is complex: viewers are active and messages are not always received as the originator intended (17).

Correlations have been identified between a linear understanding of the communication process and the linear process of making exhibitions – the latter being seen as problematic (18). In particular a process whereby exhibition departments work independently, each completing their input before the work of another begins, rather than working in teams does not allow for reflexivity. Thus the curator establishes the content of the exhibit, the designers work to the curator's brief and the education teams respond to a completed package. One alternative approach involves a more holistic model, which incorporates research and evaluation in the development process and accommodates different inputs from gallery staff and audience members.

This latter process is exemplified in the *Interpretations* research and it emerges as a key component of institutional and individual professional development. For example, during the *Vocal* project, at Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, a panel of staff and audience met regularly to interrogate interpretive strategies for the gallery and in the *Minding the Gap* project at Dundee Contemporary Arts, the establishment of a 'Think Tank' was of crucial importance, as the report identifies:

This is a mechanism that brings staff together from different departments, for the purpose of discussion and reflection. Assigning work time to a structured programme of critical reflection communicates an organisational value placed on this type of professional development... (19)

The construction of the *Interpretations*' projects, with its focus on action research and hence reflection on practice, gave staff opportunities to disrupt linear or hierarchical models of communication within their institutions and engage in more flexible and

responsive forms of engagement, which then impacts on how they interact with their audiences.

The adoption of action research as a research methodology is additionally appropriate since the project also sought to develop a culture of research within gallery education. As with the *enquire* study, gallery education practitioners and other participants have had opportunities to develop their own professional expertise and experience. *Interpretations* has enabled reflection on the forms of knowledge developed within gallery education and interpretation activities and as a result has drawn attention to what has been described as 'practical knowledge' (20). Practical knowledge is understood to be experiential, but also complex, unpredictable, contextualised and difficult to generalise from. In some cases (such as the 'feel' of a piece of sculpture, or the 'sense' that active guidance in a teaching scenario is needed, for example) it can resist systematic and explicit organisation. As a result there can be challenges in translating practical knowledge into more generalisable 'theoretical knowledge' or adequately representing it in the format of a research report. This is an issue which surfaces in *Interpretations*. Reading the report and the individual case study accounts it is apparent that considerable professional development and learning has taken place which it is not necessarily possible to make explicit. This also suggests that the benefits to participants in *Interpretations* are long-term and will inform practice in the future.

The format of the case studies

The scale, timing, structure and ambitions of the individual case studies are representative of the field of gallery education. Notably the small scale, organic and context-specific character of each study reflects the individualism and experimental aspects of gallery education. The forms of practice described – participatory, dialogic, complex and risky - are indicative of practice also. The central role of creative practice and the form and process of the sessions (smaller numbers discussing and working in groups) is significant, since it allows for negotiation and dialogue. These characteristics appear to have shaped the direction of the research and contributed positively to the experience. Yet at the same time, the challenges faced by research participants will also appear familiar to those working in the sector, not least the scale of the budget (21) and the unpredictability of visitor responses.

Thus within *Interpretations* each project reflects the local context and the needs of the specific gallery. Each has interpreted the central research question in their own way, in order to make most constructive use of all available funds. Whereas *Vocal* addressed audience engagement through the collaborative development of interpretive strategies, *Minding the Gap* focused primarily on staff development as a means to enable more effective visitor experiences. It is noticeable that neither of these projects was concerned with a specific learning agenda as an education programme would be. *Reach Out, at Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Orkney*, differed from these in so much as it embraced education activities as part of a wider audience development strategy targeted at a specific local audience. Finally *Show me yours, I'll show you mine, at Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh* resembles *Vocal* in that it brought together different practitioners as a project team to share ideas, but whereas *Vocal's* output consisted of interpretive materials such as podcasts, *Show me yours...* worked with a range of audience groups using visual written and audio formats to culminate in a film resource that supports audience-generated interpretation. In each case study creative approaches have been adopted which suggest ways that marketing, education and curation can advance audience development.

Conclusion

Interpretations is an audience development research project which appears to have been informed by a gallery education sensibility. The diverse activities undertaken and the range of findings suggest that it is not perhaps productive to attempt broad overarching conclusions or advocate a 'one size fits all' model of audience development and/or interpretation for application across the gallery sector. Yet many useful outcomes have emerged including the realisation that effective engagement comes through dialogue and negotiation, both within the institution and beyond. Of value to gallery education practitioners are the insights into how to work effectively with colleagues in marketing or curation, to develop an holistic approach. The opportunities to reflect on existing practice and plan strategically that *Interpretations* has provided indicate models of good practice in terms of organisational and personal development, as well as illuminating how best to work with visitors.

Notes and References

1. *Creative Partnerships* is the Government's creative learning programme, designed to develop the skills of young people across England through fostering long-term partnerships between schools, creative professionals and arts organisations. The programme has a commitment to researching practice also (see www.creative-partnerships.com). The Strategic Commissioning programme was set up in 2004 by the DCMS and the DCSF to develop capacity for education in the museums and galleries sector. The *enquire* research study was instigated as part of this programme (see www.en-quire.org).
2. See <http://www.scottisharts.org.uk/1/information/publications/1000271.aspx>. (Last accessed December 2nd 2008)
3. Xanthoudaki, M. Tickle, L. & Sekules, V. (eds.) (2003). *Researching Visual Arts Education in Museums and Galleries*, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
4. Lynch, H. (2006). *Mapping Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art: A report for engage Scotland, commissioned and funded by the Scottish Arts Council*. Available at <http://www.scottisharts.org.uk/1/information/publications/1003437.aspx>. (Last accessed November 24th 2008)
5. See for example *enquire* (www.en-quire.org), but also *envision*, a strand of engage's programmes which has addressed how galleries work together with young people aged 14 -21 (see <http://www.en-vision.org.uk>).
6. See www.scottisharts.org.uk/1/professional/qualityframework.aspx (Last accessed December 2nd 2008)
7. Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1994). *Museums and their Visitors*. London: Routledge.
8. The *Mapping Interpretation Practices* report identifies that interpretation in the selected galleries took place through text based media, multi-literacy formats (technology, film, resource rooms) and participatory activities (workshops, interactive exhibits and discussions).
9. Silverman, L. (2002) 'Taking a Wider View of Museum Outcomes and Experiences: Theory, Research and Magic'. *Journal of Education in Museums*, 23, 3-8.
10. See McClellan, A. (2003). *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, London: Blackwell.
11. See, for example, Wallinger, M. & Warnock, M. (eds.) (2000). *Art for All? Their Policies and our Culture*, London: Peer.

12. See, for example, Pollock, G. (1988). *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, London: Routledge and Delin, A. (2002). 'Buried in the footnotes : the absence of disabled people in the collective imagery of our past' in Sandell, R. (ed.) *Museums, Society, Inequality*, London: Routledge.
13. Adams, M. Falk, J. & Dierking, L. (2003). 'Things Change: Museums, Learning and Research', in Xanthoudaki, M. Tickle, L. & Sekules, V. (eds.) *Researching Visual Arts Education in Museums and Galleries*, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, p.16.
14. For examples of inclusive curating practices see Halbreich, K (1998). 'A safe place for ideas – a museum and its spectators'. *Engage Review* , 4,3 – 8 and Kelly, L. & Gordon, P. (2002). 'Developing a community of practice: museums and reconciliation', in Sandell, R. (ed.) *Museums, Society, Inequality*, London: Routledge.
15. Leinhardt, G. Crowley, K. & Knutson, K. (2002). *Learning Conversations in Museums*, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
16. MacGregor, N. (2004) 'A Pentecost in Trafalgar Square' in Cuno, J. (ed.) *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.30
17. Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1999) 'Communication in theory and practice, in Hooper-Greenhill, E. (ed.) *The Educational Role of the Museum*, London: Routledge.
18. Miles, R. cited in Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1999) 'Communication in theory and practice, in Hooper-Greenhill, E. (ed.) *The Educational Role of the Museum*, London: Routledge.
19. Derrick, S. (2008) ' Minding the Gap Project Report, Appendix 6, *Interpretations Project Report*. www.engagescotland.org.uk
20. Eraut, M. (1994). *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.
21. For example the evaluation report on the Artfull strand of MGEP11 programme identified that '*£5,000 is relatively large for a gallery education grant*' (Stanley, J. & Galloway, S. (2004). 'ArtFULL – Gallery Education as part of a National Educational Programme', in Anson, L. & Garrett, H. (eds.) *Encounters with Contemporary Art – schools, galleries and the curriculum. The ArtFULL Programme*, London: engage.