The Visitor Experience Revolution
Has it passed you by?

By Don Enright

I have been in the interpretation business for a long time. 33 years, in fact (I started when I was two, I swear.) During that time, trends and fashions have come and gone, but in all my years I don't think I've seen anything as fundamental as what I call the visitor experience (VE) revolution. This has been a sea change in the way museums, aquariums, historic sites and other informal education institutions do their daily business, and I'm really worried that we interpreters have been left in the dust.

It began fairly innocuously, not too long ago, with some very interesting studies that re-evaluated our institutions as houses of learning. Where in the early days it was simply taken for granted that visitors were there to learn—and do so in traditional ways—schools of thought like Dr. John Falk's contextual model of museum experience came to the fore and dispelled those myths once and for all.

Falk and his colleagues were able to demonstrate something that we had long suspected: a visit to a museum, park, zoo or historic site is not about entering a house of learning and consuming knowledge. Visitors have a whole variety of identify-based reasons for visiting our sites. Each visit takes place within a certain set of contexts—physical, social and individual— and any learning that happens is subordinate to these highly individual motivations.

John Falk categorizes these identities in the following ways: you have your explorers, who are the closest thing to classical learners. Then there are the experiencers, who are there because of the buzz or because of the "been there, done that" feeling that goes with checking something popular off a list. There are rechargers, who don't want to learn so much as simply be in a contemplative space. There are professional/hobbyists: your dinosaur geeks and serious birders and hard-core art mavens. And there are facilitators, who may actually be explorers or experiencers themselves, but when they bring their children or in-laws their main priority is facilitating someone else's experience.

Falk's personas are not the only identity-based segmentation system in our field. We also have the closely related Explorer Quotient, developed by Environics Analytics, which is another way of understanding how visitors see themselves. The EQ system acknowledges nine types; interestingly, only three are learners when they travel.

The idea behind these studies is simple: when you understand how visitors see themselves vis a vis a visit to your site, you can't help but realize the importance of the entire experience—washrooms, parking, interaction with staff, interactions with fellow visitors et cetera. The interpretive panels are suddenly a little less important, the baby change rooms much more so.

And it's not just about the amenities; there's a change of emphasis around our content, too. The facts that we set out in our panels and programs are a little less important in and of themselves; rather, it's things like the subtle visual and verbal cues in those panels (that have always made people of different ethic and socio-economic classes feel less welcome) that are suddenly much more important to address.

Along with this new understanding of visitor motivational context came the rise of a constructivist understanding of free-choice learning. Education in our institutions was now seen as one event within a lifelong suite of cognitive experiences, and this new constructivist approach seemed to cast interpretation—that is, interpretation in its most classical sense—as narrow and naive.

No longer could we assume that a good interpreter, armed with a strong theme, could meet standard outcomes in all the individuals in the audience—something that had always been a pillar of interpretive planning. No longer could it be assumed that an exhibit, even a really good one, could have a simple, predictable impact on the broad spectrum of people who participated in it. No longer was this even relevant or desirable.

Quickly, we adopted the term Visitor Experience to manifest this new level of understanding. Visitor experience is the term we use to describe two different related things: first, it is the whole of the visitor's sensory inputs through the entire visitor experience cycle, from the wishing phase, through the traveling and arrival and visiting phases, right through to the remembering phase of the visit.

Secondly and more importantly, visitor experience is now thought of as an internal cognitive process. It's what happens inside the visitor, when the individual, social and physical contexts of the visit are synthesized. The internal visitor experience, like the external one, starts before the visit and it continues long after: the cognitive processes sparked by the visit become stitched within the myriad pre-existing constructs—memories of past lessons and learnings and attitudes and values—that already live within the visitor. Visitors build their own experiences; we don't create them.

Understanding our visitors' needs and desires and trying to facilitate their experiences—both internal and external—suddenly and very quickly became more important than creating didactic panels and programs, and soon we started creating departments of Visitor Experience and hiring directors of Visitor Experience, and were suddenly left to figure out where our old interpretive planners and front line interpreters fit into the picture.

Now, down the hall in the interpreters' office, all of this new understanding seen as fairly interesting. While we no longer could lay claim to *determining* the visitor experience, we were suddenly armed with a whole new set of insights about what makes our visitors tick. And we were suddenly called upon to capitalize on this new insight by thinking of ourselves not as educators so much as facilitators of learning, facilitators of revelation, facilitators of experience.

It should have been a fairly easy transition to make. It should have cast our profession in a new and exciting light. It should have made interpretation more relevant than ever. We have, in our own way, recognized constructivism in education since 1957: "Anything that does not relate to something within the experience of the visitor will be sterile." (Look at that: Freeman Tilden was a constructivist!) We have, in our way, recognized Falk's contextual model of visitor experience, too, since the earliest days of our profession: "Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole (person) rather than any phase."

It should have injected a tremendous renewal of energy and interest in interpretation. It did the opposite. We have been relegated to the sidelines by the visitor experience revolution. Why?

I believe interpreters were less than engaged with the new visitor experience approach because from our point of view, it wasn't new. It wasn't so very different from what we had believed all along. Yes, every visitor has unique needs and interests. The better you know your audience, the more able you are to create experiences that resonate within them. Duh.

But our directors and CEOs considered this new VE approach to be utterly radical. It was as if they'd just invented Christmas. And they had no idea how their departments of interpretation fit into the new picture. I think it is this discrepancy between what our superiors considered to be new, and what good interpreters have known for fifty years, that led to a widening gap between us.

There's a big difference between what we think we do, and what our managers think we do. Ask a professional interpreter what she does for a living, and she'll say she facilitates emotional and intellectual connections. Ask her VP, and he'll say she runs touch tables and day camps. So when you're a VP or executive director and you're looking for someone to revolutionize the way you do business, you're not going to think of the people downstairs with puppets on their hands.

My own interest in the subject is coloured by my experiences of the last five or six years in the profession. I was hired as an Interpretation Specialist with Parks Canada, our national park system. I worked as a kind of regional consultant, and my responsibilities were evaluation, training and interpretive planning. It was interesting, rewarding work and it got me out spending time with interpreters in western Canada's incredible parks and historic sites.

But meanwhile, this new emphasis on Visitor Experience was gathering steam, and in our case there was a certain urgency to the movement. Visitation was dropping in our parks and historic sites—it still is—and it was hoped that by taking a more holistic approach to visitor experience we could renew our whole visitor offer and make ourselves relevant to Canadians again.

We hired Visitor Experience managers and Visitor Experience Product Development Officers without really knowing what these people were supposed to accomplish. What on earth does a Visitor Experience Product Development Officer do? Obviously, develop VE products. Except it was never really defined what those were. Is a guided walk a VE product? Is a concert in the park a VE product? Is a picnic table a VE product? Yes, yes and yes as it turns out, but we never really managed to spell that out in any clear way, and we placed new staff in the field without ever getting consensus on what they were supposed to do.

Compounding the confusion was that we still had our interpretation supervisors and interpretation officers. These worked side by side with the new VE people, but there was no clear delineation of duties. One was supposed to do interpretation and the other did Visitor Experience, *as if they were two different things*. By creating the positions in parallel, we implied a dichotomy that now seems to be fairly well entrenched in our profession: if it's didactic, it's interpretation. If it's holistic, it's visitor experience. If it's a classical learning experience, it's us. If it's anything recreational, restorative, sensory, or aesthetic, it's them. We allowed our colleagues and superiors to define us, and we seem to have accepted this narrowing of our discipline without putting up much of a fuss.

We've allowed ourselves to be sidelined by the VE revolution.

I'm here to suggest you that this division of disciplines, this awkward new custody arrangement that has become our status quo, is the very antithesis of what the new model of visitor experience was supposed to accomplish. The essence of the new VE is that learning can never be compartmentalized: there is no moment where VE ends and interpretation begins. There is no moment when we, in a park or museum or zoo, say, "Ok everyone, stop with the visitor experience already! We're going to bring you some interpretation." Yet that is precisely what we have let happen. By allowing ourselves to be relegated to the purely and traditionally didactic, we have rendered ourselves less relevant. Nowadays, while our visitors are out there on the floor having Visitor Experiences—having their identities and motivations accommodated by new and exciting programs and facilities—we wait down in our offices for our cue to bring up the biofacts for twenty minutes. I wish I was exaggerating.

In the zoos and aquariums I've worked for, interpretation is not even involved in exhibit development until after all the big visitor experience decisions are made. The audience is identified, the goals are set, the entire experience is mapped out on paper, and then the interpretive department is brought in to see if they can add a little programming.

Another case in point: new media. Every organization I've worked for has a new media department now, producing educational video, digital interactive and cell phone tours, and not a single one of those agencies has placed that New Media office within the department of interpretation. Most of them don't even talk to us. How is digital visitor experience not interpretation? How is it anything but the creation of experiences that foster emotional and intellectual connections with the resource? And how did we let this happen?

Over in the UK, the National Trust was among the first of the big old organizations to adopt a VE approach. Their director famously opened a keynote address to the Association for Heritage Interpretation with a slide that simply said, "Interpretation is dead." (Now in reality, interpretation is far from dead at the National Trust, but it was indicative of the shift there away from old-school interpretation, which was once the core of their program.) And meanwhile back in Canada, I lost my title of Interpretation Specialist in 2012. Interpretation specialists were now extinct—as was the interpretation department itself. I was now a Visitor Experience advisor.

The visitor experience revolution has happened; that ship has sailed and it's not coming back. It may be more advanced in the UK and Canada than in the US but if you haven't been touched by it yet, I suspect you will be soon.

And that leaves us in a new and inconvenient position: what will become of us? Are we content to be a small, narrow and old-fashioned subset of the new, sexy and all-encompassing visitor experience? Do we really see interpretation as isolated moments of learning within the arc of a greater visit? I don't think we do.

I think there's still time for us to re-insert ourselves into visitor experience. I think the biggest obstacle we face is probably our own perception of ourselves. We have a few deeply cherished beliefs about our profession that we need to revisit in order to join the revolution; I'd like to try to identify the most crippling of our obstacles.

As interpreters, we identify ourselves as educators first and foremost. That is not a bad thing. But with that lofty self-image sometimes comes a sense of superiority over our fellow professionals. How many of us also consider ourselves professional marketers?

I've discovered that the M-word can be a hot-button term: to some of us, it's simply part of how we do business. To others, marketing is everything that is distasteful, compromising and cheap in our industry.

I confess that in my earlier days, I avoided anything to do with the marketing department. They're not like us. They dress fancy and have big hair and they talk about unique selling points, and in those days I would generally rather drink bleach than have lunch with any of them. That is, until I got to know them, and discovered that they're passionate about exactly the same things we are: connecting people to place.

It was after I finally got off my high horse and started hanging around with marketing people that one of them took me to school about what marketing actually was. Marketing is not just promotion and it's not just merchandising: it's bigger than those.

We work in a free-choice environment. Nobody has to come to our programs and exhibitions; it's by definition a market system. And each of us, like it or not, has a role in creating or maintaining demand for what we offer. In marketing terms, you are the products person (by product we simply mean program, exhibition, event.) And who are those people you always thought of as doing marketing? They're probably actually promotions people, and you all have equal importance in the marketing of your site. You all exist to connect your publics to your place.

With a Visitor Experience approach, we need to work together. That means acknowledging that we actually need to meet the needs of our markets. No more art for art's sake; no more elitism; no more of what I call *visitor experience by historians, for historians*. No more preaching to the choir. Those days are gone; if we don't bend to meet the needs of our markets, our managers will hire people who will. Oh wait, they're already doing so, and we are no longer being invited to the management table.

Which brings me to our second big handicap.

We need to catch up with the world in the area of audience segmentation. Interpreters are so far behind in this field it's embarrassing. We need to understand our audiences as well as our promotions people do; as well as social scientists do; *as well as Facebook does*. And in order to do that we have to let go of the cherished belief that our work appeals to everyone.
I still hear this in our field! Every time I train front-line interpreters, I ask who they're planning their programs for, and I get the same answer every time: "Everyone. My job is to make programs that appeal to everyone. That's why I'm here."

Sorry, it just isn't true. Everyone doesn't come to your park, your historic site, your zoo. Everyone is elsewhere. I guarantee it.

It can be difficult to accept that our institutions are exclusive, but they are. Your beloved institution has three major barriers around it: three unseen force fields that keep almost everyone out. These are awareness, access and appeal.

Awareness refers to the sad reality that a whole lot of people still don't know you exist.

Access is a barrier in three ways: the distance to your front door, the difficulty of your terrain, and the financial cost of visiting you.

Lastly, *appeal* (or lack thereof) recognizes that you haven't managed to come up with a compelling reason for people to visit you.

Because of these eternal barriers, we do market research—segmentation—to help us find and connect with people. Not the mythic "everyone", mind you, but the specific types of people who can help us realize our missions.

Do you know who your institution's top three market segments are? Do you understand your target audience's life stage, their education levels, their values and priorities? Do you know their patterns of visitation, their group composition, the length of their visits, and their average dwell times in your various exhibits and attractions? *Do you know the way to their heart?* Because if you do, you're placing yourself at the cutting edge of the visitor experience revolution. And that's probably something your VP would like to see.

And as we take a more market-based point of view, I think we're going to have to be judicious in our use of the L-word for a while. *Learning* is a hot-button term among managers, just as *marketing* is among interpreters. The L-word epitomizes all the things our managers are trying to leave behind. We need to choose our terms—and our battles—carefully when proposing new visitor experiences.

To that end, I suggest a two-pronged approach. Let us champion learning experiences when we can demonstrate—with our new-found social science expertise—that our audience segments are actually there to learn. And damn it, they still are. The Explorer type, in Falk's terms, or the Cultural Explorer (and Authentic Experiencer and Cultural History Buff) in EQ terms, are still our bread and butter audiences and we need to continue to meet their needs. They're actually still in the majority, though in Canada we appear to be doing our best to alienate them. So let us arm ourselves with good research, demonstrate that our audiences do want to learn, and facilitate their learning experiences in all the exciting and innovative ways we've always aspired to create.

But with that, we must also learn to speak the language of the non-learner. We have to get off our high horses and recognize that some segments don't want to learn; they will never want to learn, and we have to stop looking down on them.

Non-learning audiences are a massive new market and a very attractive one to our managers and boards of directors. And those same managers have made some truly awful efforts at attracting them in the last few years: paint balling at the historic site! Movie night in the morgue! Zorbing across our national parks! Zip lines! Zip lines everywhere! As an interpreter, I think these efforts miss the mark, because they slap an extrinsic value on our resources: people come to our sites and go home again without every really connecting with the place. They may meet their own mandate (having fun), but we don't meet ours. And good visitor experience is all about the win-win.

I had an epiphany earlier this year as I was traveling. I had the opportunity spend seven months on a cruise ship, as a lecturer, and as we traveled to different destinations around Australia and the south Pacific, I would go on a lot of different excursions. Snorkelling became a favourite pastime, and I often went as part of a guided trip with the other guests. The snorkelling was very good and I found myself frustrated with the guides—they weren't teaching anyone. I wanted to

know about the fishes and corals, and I kept complaining to my friend, “Why isn’t that interpreter telling us the names?”

My big epiphany was when I stopped asking that and started to wonder, “Why am I the only one asking?” Nobody else wanted to know. Everybody was having an incredible, moving, exciting, bucket-list experience on the reefs—but almost nobody wanted it to be a learning experience as such.

Now, as an educator, you might think of that as a lost opportunity: some of these people would have actually enjoyed learning the names if they were presented by a good interpreter. But under a more constructivist approach to learning, you back off and realize that this amazing moment of snorkelling will be nested away as a cherished memory, and the next time those guests see a documentary or read an article about the reefs or go to an aquarium, suddenly everything they learn at that moment will have meaning and relevance because of this trip.

So with these new audiences, let us talk less about learning, then, but about connection with essence of place, about the forging of links, the fostering of emotions and the long-term making of meaning. And let us teach our superiors that this approach fits well within the definition of interpretation. It’s what we do. Let us design experiences that lead our non-learners to genuine, place-based experiences: experiences that are fun, transformative, memorable, and deeply rooted in authenticity. It’s not just good interpretation; it’s good tourism.

What if, when planning experiences for non-learners, we designed experiences that identified behavioural objectives and affective objectives, and left out learning objectives completely?

Behavioural:
Visitor will feel off-shore winds and smell salt air
Visitor will immerse his/her feet in cold sea water
Visitor will shake hands and chat with local fisher people
Visitor will taste fresh local seafood

Affective:
Visitor will feel exhilaration, pleasure
Visitor will feel connection with coastal people, environments and economies

Learning objectives: none.

Another one:

Behavioural objective:
Visitor will ride on horseback with park staff, dig fire trenches, eat trail food, speak and work one-on-one with a park ranger

Affective objective:
Visitor will feel connection, passion, satisfaction

Learning objectives: Zero. Nothing. Nothing immediate, anyway. In the days, weeks, months ahead, who knows?

Would that feel like selling out? Would that feel tawdry? Would you feel that your degree in environmental education were suddenly cheapened? I don't think it would. It would simply be fulfilling our mandate of creating emotional connections between the interests of the visitor and the meanings inherent in the resource.

What if interpretation became integral to promotions? In fact, what if we thought of promotions not as a bunch of ads, but rather moments of connection that happen during the wishing and planning phase of the visitor experience cycle? That might sound a bit airy-fairy, but it's absolutely brilliant when you see it in action. A few years ago the Vancouver Aquarium took an interpretive approach to its advertising: a lamp post was cleverly disguised as a glowing angler fish, and the call to action was a visit to the bioluminescence exhibit. A frightening shark's fin appeared in the water near the Vancouver sea wall, but at low tide it revealed an ad for sharks and rays on display. These ideas are clever enough to go viral, yet still honour the integrity of the institution. They're on-brand and on-theme; they work as interpretation and promotion equally.

What if the arrival experience were equally interpretive? Big museums like the Louvre are taking their exhibits (and their whole look and feel) and expanding them right into the nearest subway station. Before you even walk through the doors, you're immersed in the sights and feelings of a beautiful museum. It's fully promotional, fully welcoming and fully interpretive.

Lastly, what if the departure experience weren't just a matter of dumping visitors in a cheesy gift shop—what if that shop were fully interpretive and fully thematic? What if we could say with pride that not only were we making money in that shop, but facilitating the remembering phase, with thematic souvenirs that honour our messages and our essence of place?

What if, when promotions and merchandising teams got together, they made sure there was an interpreter in the room because our expertise was too valuable to ignore?

Of all the professions in the cultural tourism sector, interpreters should be the ones to lead the way in the visitor experience revolution. I believe that we are the ones who are in the best position to facilitate fully integrated, fully satisfying, fully memorable experiences. And isn't that the holy grail, after all? A visit where nothing is compartmentalized: where everything flows seamlessly and effortlessly through the entire visit cycle, forging connections from start to finish?

The visitor experience revolution is well underway. You'd better make sure you don't get left in the dust.

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