

(i) Museums and Galleries and the International Visitor Experience (MGIVE)

University of Westminster Pilot Project (2006): Enhancement of the International Visitor Experience to London's Museums and Galleries

Context: cultural tourism, cultural diplomacy, and the globalisation of commerce, communications, ideas

The research showed that London's leading museums and galleries are already aware of the need to develop their international visitor numbers in an increasingly competitive global market, and this is evident in their published visitor/audience reports, mission statements, annual reports and in some of the information available for international visitors. International visitor numbers are monitored as part of wider audience research, often carried out through the use of market research companies (MORI and BDRG are mentioned by Tate, for example).

There are significant differences in types of international visitors across the museum and gallery sector. Audience research by the Victoria and Albert Museum shows a significantly higher number of international creative industry professionals visiting the museum in 2004/05 compared to groups. Tate appears to be particularly aware of visitor experience, describing itself in its 2005 annual report as "one of the more visitor-focused museums in the sector" (indicating therefore that it considers other less visitor-focused) and "aware that visitors need to be placed at the heart of organisational development". After carrying out a major visitor audit on 2003, it set up a Visitor Experience Development Group, and develops strategies relating to service standards and income generation. The V&A sees itself as playing a role in cultural diplomacy in what it terms "an active cultural system", and in its annual report notes particularly the globalisation of ideas and culture as well as of commerce and communications. However, these surveys and polls are all conducted in English and within the museums and galleries. It was clear, therefore, that the use of focus groups outside the UK in our research would provide information that they do not currently have access to and a perspective that has not been explored by the current market research practices that they employ.

The websites of Tate, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum are good examples of the recognition by the sector of the need for information to be available in languages other than English, but this remains very variable. Research in 2006 revealed that the Russian-speaking visitor to London would find information on Tate, the National Gallery and the V&A, but not on the British Museum or the National Portrait Gallery. The Chinese-speaking visitor would not necessarily be presented with the appropriate character system when information in Chinese is available at all. The National Portrait Gallery provides Chinese, but not the National Gallery nor the British Museum (which of the large museums has the worst provision). Museums and galleries clearly

see foreign-language information via the website as the direction for future development – in 2006 Tate was providing on-line information in German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Greek, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Chinese and Polish and the quality and content of this is much better than that provided in print format at Tate Britain, for example. The V&A had recently expanded its provision to eight languages, already achieving the goal set out in the 2005 annual report to add seven more to Chinese by 2007 (these are Arabic, German, Spanish, French, Italian, Japanese and Russian). The V&A website recorded 10 million visits last year – 60% of which were from overseas (its status amongst creative industry professionals should be remembered here, however). Please note that in 2008, the availability of information for international visitors has changed significantly in some cases, often in response to this and subsequent research with the University of Westminster in which the above museums and galleries have been involved (see below).

However, the printed information at the point of contact currently provided for international visitors at London's leading museums and galleries, and the main focus of this research project, remains generally at best inadequate, at worst alienating. It is often too basic or too confusing to be of any practical use. When available at all, it is often poorly presented (photocopied sheets) suggesting to the visitor that information in other languages is of less value than that on offer in English. The National Gallery is the exception here with the foreign language information presented in exactly the same format as that available in English, and using the clear system of international symbols to indicate its facilities.

Critically, information takes the form of translations, of variable quality, based on written information that originates in a British cultural perspective showing no awareness of the needs, expectations and sensitivities of visitors from other cultural areas. Research at physical as opposed to virtual museum sites reveals therefore that there is often a mismatch between the aims expressed with regard to international visitors in an institution's statements and its practice. In our original survey, the V&A, a museum with a well-developed and linguistically varied website and a clear acknowledgement of the importance of international visitors in its annual reports (as indicated above) had no foreign language information available at the information desk (although it does have in fact have photocopied A4 sheets in a drawer under the reception desk) because: "Marketing doesn't like us to have too many leaflets out". According to this logic, a foreign visitor would need to approach the information desk and ask, in English, if there was any information available in their particular language.

In the pilot project, the British Museum was singled out for the paucity of information on offer. While the website offered some information in French, German, Italian, Spanish and Japanese, there are no printed leaflets and international visitors wishing to navigate the museum in any meaningful way need to bring their own guide books or pay £6 for an in-house guide. The result of this is clear in the demand for audio guides (another linguistic variable in all museums and galleries) which, observation shows, outstrips supply. Another hit and miss factor is the information which is available for

temporary exhibitions. Taking Tate Britain as an example, at one exhibition in 2006, printed information (A4 photocopied sheets) was available in Italian, French, Japanese, German and Spanish, but not in Russian and Chinese, although these are available in the general information sheets, resulting in another potentially frustrating visitor experience for speakers of those two languages. Nothing at all was available for an exhibition of recent British art being held at the same time. Consistency of provision as well as quality should be part of the standard to be set.

In the increasingly competitive global tourism environment, and in the light of planning for the 2012 Olympic Games which stresses that Britain should be a “generous host”, aware that it is hosting the Games for the world, and a “cultural inspiration” (taken from Jacqui Smith’s Keynote Address to the Museum Association’s 2005 Annual Conference), the research made clear that London’s galleries and museums need to re-visit attitudes to the information (and by extension the welcome) that they provide for foreign visitors. While Britain is consistently rated highly in visitor surveys for ‘culture’, it is almost universally rated poor for welcome according to polls carried out for VisitBritain. The VisitBritain survey shows that the Chinese, for example, believe that they would not be warmly received in Britain, while France comes top of their perception of the most welcoming country which in the light of this developing market requires urgent attention. Of the Europeans surveyed, only the Russians scored Britain highly for the likely welcome that they would receive.

The notion of the ‘Entrepreneurial Museum’ was one of the themes for the Museums Association Annual Conference held in October 2006, and it is clear, again in annual reports and other institutional statements that the sector is looking for ways to generate and increase income. With evidence that the UK visitor economy remains strong and with growth rates of visitors from countries such as China and Eastern Europe increasing (based on VisitBritain research), it is not enough to rely on an unsatisfactory mixture of often poor quality foreign language material and assumptions that international visitors will largely be able to cope with English.

Pilot project focus groups were held (Summer 2006) in France, Spain, Germany, Russia, the Gulf (Bahrain) and Hong Kong (with Hong Kong and mainland Chinese and Taiwanese participants). The groups worked with the information currently available in their respective language at one of London’s leading museums. In response to initial feedback, the Project’s linguists/intercultural specialists then re-worked the material, re-presented it to the focus group, and then again collected feedback. The resulting material was therefore culturally-informed and met linguistic and cultural expectations. The pilot project therefore identified that the material currently on offer, originating from a British cultural perspective showed no awareness of needs/expectations/sensitivities of visitor’s from other cultural areas, as previously noted.

It relies on translations that vary in quality (sometimes supplied by our now familiar friend the “accidental linguist”), revealing preconceptions and

concerning communication and culture which are often negative in subtle ways, and ultimately leading to lower outcomes in terms of cultural mission/economic sustainability.

This internally-funded pilot project led to a Workshop Series funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

**Museums and Galleries and the International Visitor Experience (MGIVE)
Research Workshop Series
University of Westminster June-December 2007**

Participants of the first two workshops were the project team of linguists/intercultural specialists from the Department of Modern and Applied Languages, and marketing/communications directors from the National Gallery, Tate, National Portrait Gallery, Museum of London, British Museum and the V&A; at workshop 3 museum marketing/communications directors from the museum and gallery sector across the UK participated (The Royal Academy, National Maritime Museum, Historic Royal Palaces, Roman Baths (Bath), British Library, National History Museum, Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge), and the National Museums of Scotland).

The languages covered were those available at undergraduate level in the Department: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish.

The activities of the workshops and the themes explored

The fundamental aim of the workshop series was to facilitate further development, exchange, and eventual application of academic research into the needs and expectations of international visitors to the UK museum and gallery sector, focusing firstly on London and then extending to include institutions across the country.

Its original specific aims were to:

- Work through a set of issues and questions concerning not only the experience of the international visitor, but also the needs of the museum and gallery sector and its potential to develop in this area of intercultural communication;
- Discuss the possibilities of providing a readily applicable, accessible and adaptable model for the development of culturally-informed and high-value information for international visitors based on effective and positive intercultural communication that meets these visitors' cultural and linguistic expectations;
- Develop guidelines for 'best practice' in the application and use of the above model (possibly in the form of an on-line 'toolkit') that would significantly enhance the international visitor experience in the museum and gallery sector.

A major aim of the workshop series was that the insights should convert into strategy and then into practice, based on evidence-based research findings,

and should be immediately applicable. After further analysis by the range of modern linguists/intercultural specialists of printed material brought by the museum professionals to the workshop, each museum accepted to work closely with one language to develop and test new material.

At the second workshop, the academics and museum professionals presented their experience of working together and working with the draft new material in their chosen language for further comments. A major issue concerning branding emerged which had not been anticipated and which produced a new item for discussion concerning the extent to which a museum's 'brand' is embedded not only in its logo (an obvious example of branding) but in the very discourse it uses to talk about itself. This leads to a major consideration since such discourse does not necessarily transfer well or easily to other cultural contexts. A number of possible solutions were identified – for example the writing (in collaboration) of text directly into the foreign language, or the production of a more 'neutral' English base text that can then be appropriately adapted to the needs and expectations of a variety of international visitors.

At the third and final workshop, a wider range of marketing and communications professionals from across the UK visitor sector were invited to share our findings and to comment on them. The six museums involved most closely in the project reported on in-house testing of the material (where it had been possible to carry this out) and/or the academic team presented further findings from international focus groups on the new material. The experience of all those closely involved in the project proved to be very positive with changed attitudes and shared knowledge apparent on both sides and resulted in material that was equally positively received by international visitors on whom it was tested.

What also became clear was the need to explain the aim of such work carefully. The decision emerged that the original aim of developing a model for the content of, and guidelines for the use of high-value and culturally-informed information for international visitors in a readily applicable, accessible and adaptable form (for example, initial discussions suggested the possibility of developing an on-line 'toolkit') for use in the museum sector was not the most effective or appropriate use of the research findings.

Instead, a model of a process for the production of such high-value information was developed and discussed, but for use by the linguistic/intercultural specialists in discussion with the needs of a particular museum or gallery, since these vary significantly, and also because the cultural findings remain open to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It should be made clear that this is not an exercise in 'political correctness' as one new participant the final workshop suggested, it is a way of making decisions to provide a better experience for a specific target audience.

Neither does it attempt to “smooth out” the pleasures and challenges of ‘intercultural exchange’ in the way that it has been explored with regard to tourism (Jack and Phipps, 2007). As Phipps also writes: “I regard attempts to manage away intercultural difference and linguistic diversity as removing certain crucial dimensions and opportunities for encounter and for imagination from the tourist experience [...] smoothing out the intercultural bumps in languages and tourism itself places significant obstacles in the path of the creative processes of culture, closing down options and imaginative possibilities for cultural change” (Phipps, 2007). Rather the process developed aims to enhance the visitor experience within a specific context (that of the navigation of the museum/gallery) with a view to building enjoyment and confidence in those intercultural bumps that come into being in the “intercultural life of exchange” (Jack and Phipps, 2007).

Overall MGIVE Research Development and Research Findings

(a) Research Base: Communication for Intercultural Navigation (CIN)

The research which resulted from the MGIVE projects was developed from established theoretical bases and MGIVE Team research resulting in the creation of an original, cutting-edge model/process of producing material (University of Westminster research known as ‘Communication for Intercultural Navigation’; CIN) that interrogates not only how to communicate most effectively with international visitors, but more generally how to package information meaningfully in the museum/gallery context (with enormous potential for replicability across areas of the public/private sectors whose needs and business are international and inter/multicultural in scope). While the focus of the MGIVE project is on the international visitor experience, the research has important potential for domestic multicultural audiences, and for education programmes more widely (notably in Modern Foreign/Community Languages, providing an obvious and effective link to Routes into Languages programmes).

(b) Research Background:

The research model is grounded in theories of intercultural communication and translation studies, and also partially based on semiotic analysis (including the notion of the ‘semiosphere’). It extends beyond texts and translations to issues concerning social interaction and ethnographic encounters, incorporating some methodologies from sociolinguistics to inform not only the analysis of texts and their semiotic value, but also, crucially, their production by one culture for consumption by another. This is fundamental to the CIN model which is emphatically not about the translation of texts, but precisely about the production and consumption of information across cultures. The research that informs the CIN model now cuts across aspects of translation studies, intercultural studies, and applied language studies together with tourism studies (including tourism and intercultural exchange), museum studies and cultural policy. Put simply, no-one in museum studies (and indeed beyond) is thinking about audiences in this way.

(c) Overall MGIVE Research Findings:

- current quality/availability of information for international visitors reveals preconceptions concerning communication and culture (often negative in subtle ways, leading to lower outcomes in terms of cultural mission/economic sustainability); needs/expectations of those visitors often vary widely from information on offer;
- current information usually takes form of translations, varying in quality, of material originating from British cultural perspective showing no awareness of needs/expectations/sensitivities of visitors from other cultural areas;
- museums and galleries have (admittedly restricted) budgets to spend on visitor information, but (as sector readily admits) little thought goes into overall strategy/policy despite awareness of need to provide appropriate experience for international visitors;
- some museums and galleries believe they have developed a 'global brand', often embedded in the institution's own promotional discourse, but this does not transfer readily into other cultural areas;
- model needed (CIN developed as above) for production of high-value, specifically-targeted, culturally-informed material based on effective intercultural communication that meets cultural/linguistic expectations of international visitors; for use by linguistic/intercultural specialists in discussion with needs of specific museum/gallery (since these vary significantly) to counter above problems;
- support needed to identify target audience (not necessarily everyone from a particular cultural area) and provide them with a better experience.

The application of the CIN model/process produces effective intercultural communication because it questions the very assumptions that producers and consumers from different cultures bring to what constitutes 'information'. These questions address the surface notions of neutrality and efficiency that are normally anchored within a deeper, but ultimately mono-dimensional code/conduit metaphor of language/ideology of communication. Gallery 'interpretation' and educational/marketing 'information' are both re-orientated as part of the 'cultural navigation' process developed, which positions each communicative act within a carefully articulated response to audience and context.