

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

**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.

The workshop series brought together modern linguists/intercultural experts from the Department of Modern and Applied Languages at the University of Westminster (London) and museum and gallery professionals (notably in the area of marketing and communication).

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 wide range of activities and themes were explored:

**Workshop 1:**

We began with the results of a pilot study carried out by the Project Team at the University of Westminster during 2006 which showed that the current quality and availability of information for international visitors to London's museums and galleries varies enormously, revealing preconceptions concerning communication and culture, and that it is often negative in subtle ways. In addition, the needs and expectations of those visitors often vary widely from the information currently on offer as focus groups in France, Spain, Germany, Russia, the Arab Gulf and China had showed. We went on to discuss how the initial research had also showed that London's museums and galleries were well aware of the need to provide a suitable welcome for international visitors in an increasingly competitive global market, but were perhaps not carrying this out in the most effective way. The need to plan for the 2012 London Olympics was also acknowledged, with the ambition to make Britain "a generous host" and a "cultural inspiration" (as described by

Jacqui Smith in her keynote address at the Museum Association's Annual Conference back in 2005). We also all recognised the sector's recognition of the need for information to be available in languages other than English, on museum/gallery websites as well as in printed form, but there was open acknowledgement that it remained variable, inconsistent and patchy. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that some printed information at the point of contact for international visitors is often currently at best inadequate and at worst alienating. It is often too confusing to be of any practical or indeed intellectual use (one example would be the Chinese-speaking visitor being presented with an inappropriate character system, when indeed information in Chinese is available at all). Current information usually takes the form of translations, varying in quality, of written information originating from a British cultural perspective showing no awareness of the needs, expectations and sensitivities of visitors from other cultural areas. In many cases, research at physical as opposed to virtual museum sites revealed a mismatch between the aims expressed in an institution's statements with regard to international visitors, and its practice.

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

### **Workshop 2:**

The modern linguists/intercultural specialists and museum professionals presented their experience of working together and then 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/gallery'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. A brief overview of some international museum and gallery websites was also presented and we noted the much greater investment by certain national museums and galleries abroad in the quality of the content of their websites both for the domestic and international audience.

### **Workshop 3:**

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 (see more information below), 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.

### **Overview of the people and organisations involved and the frequency and type of collaborations**

The linguistic and intercultural specialists (French, Spanish, German, Russian, Arabic and Chinese) involved in the project were all academics based in the Department of Modern and Applied Languages at the University of Westminster, London and led by a Principal Investigator who is a Professor of French and Francophone Literary and Cultural Studies and a Westfocus Knowledge Transfer Fellow. The team were advised in some areas of their research methodology for focus group work by a colleague in the Department of Social and Political Studies. The principal museums involved in developing and testing new material were the National Gallery, the British Museum, the V&A, the National Portrait Gallery, Tate and the Museum of London. In addition, the final workshop was attended by marketing and communications directors from 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. There were three workshops and in addition the Steering Group (PI with National Gallery, V&A and British Museum) met three times. The project team met on average a further three times with their respective museums to work on the new material for presentation. Also involved were international focus group participants who had the opportunity to comment on current and newly-developed material.

### **Evaluation of how the thematic area has been advanced through the network**

This particular project has served, in addition to its research findings, to show one way in which Humanities-based research, in this case emerging originally from the discipline of Modern Languages, can engage in knowledge transfer

activities in a mutually beneficial way for both academic and public communities. Originally grounded in theories of intercultural communication and translation studies, and also partially based on semiotic analysis, the research nonetheless also extended beyond texts and translations to issues concerning social interaction and ethnographic encounters. The pilot project also indicated the potential for methodologies from sociolinguistics, in particular linguistic politeness and the ethnography of speaking to inform not just the analysis of texts and their semiotic value but also their production by one culture for consumption by another. While these theoretical considerations remained true to some extent, as the project developed it became clear that in terms of dissemination, its findings were better placed in Tourism Studies, Museum Studies and indeed Cultural Policy, thereby moving research in Modern Languages away from the perhaps more obvious alliances with Sociolinguistics for example, to new areas of collaboration.

The Project Team has now developed a model and process entitled 'Communication for Intercultural Navigation' (CIN) for producing material that interrogates not only how to communicate most effectively with international visitors, but more generally how to package information meaningfully in the museum/gallery sector (with potential for replicability across areas of public/private sectors whose needs and business are international and inter/multicultural in scope). The CIN model 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.

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, 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.

### **Key advances in understanding that emerged from the discussions**

The main aim of this research workshop series remained pragmatic, and the key advances in understanding were similarly pragmatic. On one level, the academic researchers had to overcome a fear of being patronising in their explanations of the needs and expectations of international visitors from their respective cultural areas. Indeed one commented that in fact nothing was "too basic" and they came to realise that although museums and galleries had (admittedly restricted) budgets to spend on international visitor information that little thought had gone into overall strategy and policy, an issue readily

acknowledged by the sector. The academics also learned a great deal about how museums function (it “humanised” them in the words of one researcher) and especially about the restrictions of branding. A key finding of the research is that while some museums and galleries may believe that they have developed a ‘global brand’, and a branding strategy which is often embedded in the very discourse which the institution uses to promote itself, this does not in fact transfer readily into other cultural areas. There are a number of strategies that might be used to counter this (as explained above) – but these need to be developed for the particular needs and audiences of each museum or gallery which in fact vary widely. A further fundamental advance in understanding went beyond the issue of information for international visitors and extended to the production of effective information and communication more generally (i.e. including in English for the English-speaking world also, and beyond the museum sector). This centres on the tension between ‘promotion’ and ‘information’ material, and above all on being clear who the target audience is and how best to communicate with them. As far as the international visitor experience is concerned, particular mention should be made of the use of native speaker researchers and international focus groups interviewed in their own countries (or in some cases on site, but still in their native language). While museums and galleries use visitor surveys widely in their own reports, these are usually conducted on-site and in English. Much better quality, and different, feedback was gathered using the methods in this project.

### **Future topics for investigation**

- Website information. This project focused mainly on printed information, but some work was also done on existing websites. In some cases the information for international visitors was of better quality than in print. However, more comparative work in a global context with both web-based and printed material would be beneficial. The short international survey conducted for the purposes of the second workshop showed that much greater investment is needed by the UK museum and gallery sector to compete in a global market and to reach international expectations on what a website can offer the visitor;
- Tourism and Leisure sectors more broadly. This project focused on the museum and gallery sector, but the research findings clearly have implications for and relevance to the broader tourism and leisure sectors. This would include high-profile international and sporting events such as City of Culture and the Olympic Games. This research could make a contribution to national language policy planning around such events;
- Exhibitions. This project focused on general information for visiting a particular museum and gallery. However, there remains the issue of enhancing the visitor experience to particular exhibitions. One finding of the focus groups was the level of frustration in a visitor being told about a particular exhibit or exhibition in the information available in their own language only to find that there is no further information available to them other than in English. While there are clearly budget

constraints at play here, this should be considered when developing language policy and needs to inform decisions concerning how museums and galleries decide to approach communication with international visitors;

- Further Humanities-based consultancy work. This project provides one example for knowledge transfer emerging from a Department of Modern Languages and developing in some unexpected directions that could serve as a basis for further consultancy work.

### **Future collaborations and research projects that emerged from the workshops**

There are current plans for the development of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships and Fellowship bids based on the findings of the research. These involve the University of Westminster MGIVE Project Team and major London museums and galleries.

The University of Westminster Research and Consultancy Office has commissioned a market research company to investigate the potential for further consultancy work in the museum and gallery sector and beyond (for example, tourism, leisure, international cultural and sporting events) based on the project's findings and working practices.

### **Plans for further development or action**

See above – further research and knowledge transfer activities will certainly ensue from this research workshop series. This has been an overwhelmingly positive project for all those involved with a myriad of more intangible achievements on the 'human level' that will also continue to develop in, for example, staff development and CPD activities.