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Amanda C. Neill

*Pennsylvania State University - Harrisburg*

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# Museum Docents' Understanding of Interpretation

Amanda C. Neill, The Pennsylvania State University—Harrisburg, USA

**Abstract:** *This basic interpretive qualitative study explored docents' perceptions of their interpretive role and sought to determine how those perceptions shape docents' practice. The conceptual frameworks of hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism inform the study. The study offers a view into the world of volunteer adult educators in non-formal education settings.*

## Purpose of the Study

Since the 1890s, museums in America have used docents to educate the public (Giltinan, 2008), meaning hundreds of institutions have invested resources and personal responsibility in these educators, for which there are hundreds of thousands. Museums have not made a great effort to understand the nuances that occur on tours as a result of their museum representatives. At a time when so much attention has been given to the study of visitors' experiences in museums (Chang, 2006) it is time to turn to the educator to understand how the docent's work is performed.

This study also serves to reconnect the field of adult education to museums. Given the variety of learning activities and the scale of the museum audience, one might expect the fields to more be closely aligned—and initially, they were. The field of adult education recognized museums as research and educational institutions in the 1930s handbooks (Coleman, 1934), but in the 1960s, the field moved away from museums as sites of practice from which they perform research, evident in the paucity of museum-related articles in education journals. Currently, there is still a dearth in research by adult educators about museums. After a multi-decade chasm, only a single aspect of museums was recognized by Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007) in their most recent foundational book, that is, the non-formal educational (NFE) opportunities existing in them. In 2008, scholars in museum education sought insight from adult educators for an issue of the *Journal of Museum Education* titled 'Adult Learning in Museums.' This unique setting, the "original drop-in learning center" (Silver, 1978, p. 209) and its educators can be better understood from an educational perspective as a NFE setting.

Recognizing that volunteers perform the invaluable service of delivering adult education in museums and that their experience is not well understood, the purpose of this research is to explore museum docents' perceptions of their interpretive role and determine how those perceptions shape docents' practice. Understanding the docent, solely from the docent's perspective, would be unique in the existing literature. Addressing this gap, this study is one of a handful that applied adult education concepts to museum educational practices in giving voice and precedence to the educator.

## Conceptual Frameworks

This study is informed by hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism. Hermeneutics is to express aloud; to explain, such as explaining a situation; and to translate, as in translating from one language to another. Originating from the Greek verb *hermeneuein* meaning 'to interpret' (Palmer, 1969), the word is linked to Greek mythology through Hermes, the messenger god, who

mediated the worlds of gods and humans by transmuting “what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp” (p. 13). Schleiermacher and Heidegger (1999) greatly contributed to hermeneutics but Gadamer (1976) sought to uncover the nature of human understanding with relation to the humanities. He calls what each person projects a “horizon of meaning” (p. xv) which is based on the current social and political milieu, one’s own value structure, and assumptions made about the person or people to whom one is interpreting.

The other framework, symbolic interactionism examines the formation of self and identity within the context of society and explores the impact of others on the self. It focuses on interactions: between society and the self, between individuals, and within the self. Blumer (1986) gave the label ‘symbolic interactionism’ to the theory which is about communication through symbols, roles, and fostering shared understanding. It expects human action to be dynamic given one’s perspective, communication goals, and the individuals with whom one is dealing.

### **Research Design**

This basic interpretive qualitative study took place in private art museums in northeastern United States that offered docent-led tours of the collection. Each docent was observed giving a tour to an adult audience and field notes were taken. Subsequently, one-on-one semi-structured and open-ended interviews were performed. Weeks later, follow up questions were asked as needed. All participants were unpaid volunteers and represented various fields and backgrounds. Four male and ten females participated, all of whom were at least twenty-five years old. The average age was sixty-six years. All had been docents for at least one year, with the average being 7.6 years.

### **Findings**

Data was grouped into four categories: delivering an individualized and valued tour, throwing light upon, projecting one’s horizon of meaning, and outcomes docents hope to achieve. First, docents delivered an individualized and valued tour by tailoring the tour to the audience members and demonstrating dedication to the museum so that their work is perceived as valuable to the institution. Twelve docents made their tours personal to them by: projecting their personal approach to tour giving; allowing their personal agendas to come through; making the tour ‘about them’; and having their professional life influence tour content. Many preferred to offer the tour in a way that they liked to receive a tour. For example, one said: “I can’t stand being lectured to so don’t want to do it.” Allowing their own ideas to float to the surface, some docents introduced a few objects as ones they liked most or least. Others shared personal experiences with artists, one “at a holiday party” and another discussing commissioning a work for the docent’s home. Both felt this personal information was “important to the tour.” Making the tour very much ‘about her’ one docent said, “I get to show off...I have an ego; so I share personal experiences even though they are not essential.” Another way docents made their tours personal was to allow their professional lives to offer insights into objects. One said, “As a woodworker, I...explain stuff to people. I’ve done joints, dovetails.” Insider knowledge contributed to individual tour content.

Without question, the dedication these participants displayed exhibited itself in many ways. Docents believe that their volunteer work adds tangible value to a museum. One explained, “If I can’t do a good job, if I can’t give value to this place, there is no sense in my being here.”

Another said, “I am just excited that I get to be a part of it.” Participants took the job seriously and respected the role. Additionally, preparing was an important part of the docent’s role and it happened at the museum, en route to the museum, and in between tours. Many docents were self-directed in their ongoing preparation. Additionally, they maintained professionalism and followed protocol when dealing with sensitive subjects or topics. One participant explained, “There is an ethical code for docents” and as museum representatives, they upheld certain confidentiality and privacy issues involving artists and their lives.

Second, on a tour, docents threw light upon objects or took foreign art objects and made them clear to museum visitors. For those who had little prior knowledge of objects, docents used four techniques: modeling Hermes, guiding from the side, mediating content, and engaging visitors. First, they modeled Hermes by mediating between curator jargon and tour-goer layman speech. One explained, “You are familiarizing people with (art) by telling them about it or by... taking a language and putting it into another” so that it is understandable. This was also done by giving voice to the artist. Docents tried “to interpret what the artist had in mind when he did the work.” Here, the docent is the vessel for the artist to communicate to viewers. Second, some docents took more of a supporting role, guiding from the side. Kaye described her position as such: “I think they (tour-goers) should be there to give their opinions...I don’t want to tell them what to see.” Others said, “You are trying to lead them to the art.” These docents want audience members to experience and interpret the artwork for themselves.

The next technique was to mediate content or decide what to include on a tour. One docent omitted some material another docent was overheard sharing and when asked about it she said, “As I could see them, I’m thinking, I don’t need to go down there (that path), it’s too much information... this isn’t the group that might be valuable to.” Deciding what material to filter was based on tour-goers’ “interest level” or “literary level.” Docents utilized the one they deemed most appropriate to make objects clear to museum visitors. Fourth, docents engaged visitors with techniques such as: levity and humor, storytelling, interaction, and theatrics. Some techniques were used to try to grab people’s attention, others to convey facts in an interesting way, others as coping mechanisms for having shy if not silent tour-goers, and others were used to spark a bit of dialogue to get people actively looking at objects. One docent used good-natured teasing about giving a quiz at the end of the tour. Also, stories presented information in a memorable way as opposed to reciting dates and names, called “machine-gun guiding” by one docent. Interaction with tour-goers was sought so questions about the objects were posed. One docent spoke of the benefit of having a dialogue, “it is a collective experience because we had eight people (discussing) what was happening in that picture.” Getting theatrical, one docent demonstrated his passion with his “...interest, facial expression, animations, recognition.” Another employed a prop on the tour, a book. Every action, joke, question, and prop used by docents was meant to focus or refocus people to the art before them.

Third, docents projected a “horizon of meaning” (Gadamer, 1976, p. xv) which gets at *how* docents acted. Depending on the situation, docents projected different perspectives—hence, each tour was different than the next. A docent stated that each guide speaks “from a certain point of view. Nobody...is going to give exactly the (same) tour exactly the same way because you are interested in certain things more than others... (The content) is affected by your background and your view on it.” Docents considered tour-goers’: residence, prior knowledge of art, gestures made on the tour, reason for attendance, and frequency at the museum.

The first factor affecting how docents frame the tour was where tour-goers reside. At the beginning of seven tours, docents asked where tour-goers were from. One explained, “If people

are from out of town it makes a big difference...” Second, docents factored in tour-goers’ perceived education level or art savviness. Assessing the knowledge of tour-goers was tricky. Some wanted to know if there were any artists in the group. One docent explained, “You have to know your audience and that might color a lot of the ways I ask questions and follow up because I know they are knowledgeable.” Third, physical gestures tour-goers made, such as their body language and facial expressions impacted the tour. One said that audience members “have a way of telling you” with their “body posture.” One described low energy his tour-goers displayed, “they were starting to chat amongst themselves... to wander.” Continually aware of the situation, docents looked at tour-goers for clues as to their demeanor and interest level, and docents quickly adapted. Fourth, before most tours, docents sought to determine a group’s reason for coming to the museum. One stated, “If you can figure out why they’ve come ...that helps (determine) where I’m going to go (in the galleries)... It’s qualifying...” Getting to the root of what brought someone in helps the guide in providing a meaningful tour. Finally, docents took into account how often visitors came to the museum. At the beginning of tours, docents asked tour-goers if they had visited before. One docent explained how she altered content if guests had been there multiple times: “You cut back on some of the basic introductory information.” In conclusion, a variety of aspects related to tour-goers impacted the horizon of meaning docents projected.

The final theme was that docents had specific outcomes that they hoped to achieve. Short term outcomes were being given feedback mid-tour and after the tour and tour-goers viewing the tour as a worthwhile use of their time and money. For example, a docent explained, “It’s like an audience. You want that feedback. You feel you have failed in some ways if you don’t get some kind of a reaction...” Longer term goals were that tour-goers were able to “look at art with a fresh eye.” Many docents hoped they were able to provide a lesson that would influence visitors’ future museum-going behavior. One stated: “If I can get someone to want to come back to a museum like this, or come back to this one, then I’ve been successful.”

## **Discussion**

A number of points warrant further discussion including a) docents’ perception of tour-goers and vice versa; b) prior teaching experience influenced the docent’s practice; c) constructivism exhibited on tours; d) docents sought to create a tailored educational interaction; and e) and stories and humor were popular interpretative techniques.

Docents spoke about how what they perceive about tour-goers and vice versa impacts a tour insofar as what docents say and how much time is spent in front of objects. For example, docents listed nonverbal clues tour-goers offered (i.e. wandering eyes, yawning, and shuffling their feet) to express their level of interest, etc. and reacted accordingly. Some docents found that based on visitors’ facial expressions, they enjoyed hearing stories, and thus, docents told more. How a docent responded to tour-goers’ actions was based on what the docent thought the actions observed meant. One way to understand these actions is through symbolic interactionism, which recognizes that both the verbal and nonverbal feedback impacts perception and behavior. But, some of these purposeful strategic actions are not able to be understood under this framework as reactions or reflexes are physical responses where behavior is not assessed, therefore, are typically not symbolic. Yet, unconscious motives exist (Blumer, 1986), meaning it is possible that not all symbolic interactions need be on a conscious level. One concern is that since the docent and tour-goer only just met, the meaning of a tour-goer’s action could be misinterpreted by a docent, for which symbolic interactionism does not take into account.

Prior teaching experience influenced docents' practice, as eight of the fourteen had training and/or experience as an educator. Many spoke of classroom techniques that were worked into tours, including "teacher voice" which can be understood by hermeneutics as educators must realize that their curricular decisions are influenced by their past (Slattery, Krasny, & O'Malley, 2007). Interestingly, when asked to consider how tour-goers view them, almost all of the eight gravitated toward seeing themselves in a teacher-type role. One said, as "an authoritative figure and possibly as a teacher." Only one non-teacher said that he viewed the docent as "the teacher." It is difficult to know how much of that perception is self-imposed in assuming a familiar role or is real. A tenet of symbolic interactionism is that one's past influences one's perceptions (Blumer, 1986).

Third, many participants engaged their tour-going audience in techniques that espouse the theory of constructivism, such as, promoting conversations around objects, asking open-ended questions and allowing quiet time in an exhibit space as "there does not need to be an intermediary between them and the work", as one docent said. Tour-goers were encouraged to physically interact with objects and to draw their own conclusions. One docent said, "There are no wrong answers." Constructivists see learning "as an interpretive, recursive, nonlinear building process by active learners interacting with their surround..." (Fosnot & Perry, 2005, p. 34). Participants' predominant emphasis on hearing the voices of learners contradicts findings that non-formal educators emphasize the transmission model (Witcomb, 2006) where "epistemologically, the non-formal educators predominately conceptualized knowledge as bounded and finite—something that is transferred" (Taylor, 2005, p. 452) from instructor to learner. Few docents in this study subscribed to that conception of knowledge. One way to understand this is due to the content; the ambiguity inherent in interpreting art is not bound and finite. In this study, meanings of objects can change over time and depend on who is interpreting.

Fourth, docents tried to shape each tour so that it was appropriate to the learners, or create a tailored educational interaction. By asking questions and engaging in a dialogue with tour-goers, docents strove to forge connections between the interests of the audience and the objects. Tour-goers were encouraged to share their knowledge and perspective and hermeneutics offers a way to help understand things from somebody else's point of view. Docents' efforts to connect tour-goers with the objects on the tour could also be explained by felt-involvement (Celsi & Olson, 1988) as the attention and involvement of tour-goers is significantly influenced by one's motivational state (Taylor, 2008). Part of the tailored educational interaction involves collectively negotiating meaning or symbolic interactionism (Fine & Beim, 2007). Thinking about collective memory at places housing cultural symbols, one cannot help but consider how participants were seemingly unaware of how they relied "on concretized forms of collective memory negotiate(d) with each other" (p. 4). Docents did not question authority nor were critical around their own negotiation of objects' meanings. Rather, docents were hobbyists and loyal to institutional messages.

Lastly, stories and humor were popular interpretive techniques. Through stories, which connected the audience to objects, docents communicated factual information in an elegant narrative. Stories were typically one to four minutes in length. The second technique seen on tours was docents using humor. Humor broke the ice at a tour's beginning, made people comfortable in the setting, and instigated conversation. Whether it was teasing the audience about being assessed at the tour's end or included the self-deprecating variety (Taylor, 2008) humor was seen as a way to make the tour fun.

## Implications for Practice

This research offers a variety of implications for those who practice adult education, and museum education, and interpretation. Improving our understanding of how educators teach adults in NFE settings, Brennan's (1997) internal model of NFE could be expanded to be more inclusive of settings such as art museums where educators are able to evaluate learners' needs, craft messages, and be adept at offering an interpretation that is useful for a variety of visitor types. This study informs museum education in that it explains what significantly impacts tour content: the individual docent's professional expertise and interests, and what docents assume about audiences. Findings could help train docents in how to assess audiences, meet learners where they are interest-wise and experience-wise, and offer interpretative techniques. Finally, docents should be considered practitioners of interpretation. Not unlike the conservation message at national parks, docents' work is mission-based. Behavior modification takes the form of making tour-goers frequenters of museums. Helping visitors make sense of objects, the personal interpretation offered at this NFE setting offers a great example of a tailored educational interaction by adult educators for adult audiences.

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