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The Writing on the Wall: Could a new approach to Museum and Gallery interpretation promote respect for different forms of expertise?

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The Writing on the Wall

How might a new approach to Museum and Gallery interpretation, one based on respecting different forms of expertise, improve and enhance our working relationships and the way we communicate with our audiences.

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In memory of May Gibson, who encouraged me to be curious about everything, and for Beatrix and Leo who serve as constant reminders of this.

Introduction

Walking up to the front door of some of my favourite galleries, I am struck by what I am met with: words. There are words everywhere. Banners, signage, floor plans, programme guides, information about the audio guide (words in your ear), rules (sadly)- and that's just at the front door. Further into the building, every room, object, painting or empty space is accompanied with an explanatory text, telling you what the thing is, why you can't touch it or why it has been removed. These visually rich environments are becoming more and more mediated by language, partly in the belief that this makes a museum or art gallery more enriching and accessible. Attempts to contextualise collections with words are being made across the globe. It is very much part of the 21st century museum experience.

I find this simultaneously fascinating and frustrating. Who writes all these words and how do they go about doing it? Are the messages that we send out into the world in congruence with the writing on the walls inside? Do we use communication processes that speak harmoniously to one another? The gap between how we present ourselves (verbally) to the outside world and what a visitor experiences after walking through the door is, I fear, in danger of widening. With this in mind, this paper will focus on who is doing the writing on the walls and what processes are followed to do so.

My motivation to focus on this stems from the growing dissatisfaction I have with the kind of information that we produce within the walls of museums and galleries. As a visitor I am often disappointed or bored by what I read next to exhibits. As a professional, I am frequently frustrated that more time and effort is not apportioned to making the most of the vast range of expertise across the personnel spectrum. There are many voices to be heard within any museum or gallery and yet the words written on the walls for the visitors are given a voice by a select few.

It is how these many voices might be incorporated into the way we communicate and what messages we transmit that is of interest here. I want to explore how we might apply creative and imaginative ways of forming collaborative enterprise with colleagues for the benefit of our organisations *as well as* the audiences for whom we purport to be serving. What could we be doing in order to be better heard and read?

I believe it is important to co-create resources with colleagues and feel that we may not quite be there yet in the processes we use in our attempts to collaborate with one another. If we could create more opportunities to break away from the departmental roles allocated by appointment and work in cross-departmental ways more often, we could amount to more than the sum of our parts.

In 'Thriving in the Knowledge Age: New Business Models for Museums and other Cultural Institutions', John Falk and Beverley Sheppard provide a concise summary of the departmentalisation that has taken place:

> Most of us begin working in museums because we believe in the work, because something in museums move us, because we can see them continuing to make a difference in the world. We translate this conviction into a myriad of roles, defining ourselves by our individual set of functions - curator, registrar, administrator, educator, marketer and fundraiser among others. We quickly divide into areas of special interests, skills and frameworks. Each has its own expertise - and traditionally an unspoken hierarchy - and we've been known to protect our professional turf quite fiercely. The battlegrounds between curators and educators are legendary. (Falk and Sheppard 2006: 112)

This last sentence takes me right to the heart of my subject. It is not always necessary or helpful to consider certain roles as being polar opposites. The 'battleground' referred to by Falk and Sheppard could be put to far more creative and productive use if it were to be seen as a cultural equivalent to the trading zone metaphor developed by Harvard Professor Peter Galison. (To whom I shall refer to later in this paper.)

Most often applied to scientific collaboration, the concept of trading zones describes the 'opportunity for people to work together and create solutions for problems that couldn't even be conceived of or articulated in more traditional silo mentalities. Trading zones start with an assumption of difference, and intertwine process with product to create shared benefits and outcomes that can be spread widely.' (Miller, Parker and Gillinson 2004: 38)

This trading zone metaphor will be considered in more depth later; it has played a critical role in the trajectory this research has taken. Similarly, examples of collaborative productivity drawn from other sectors and non museum sources (science, publishing and crowd sourcing literature in particular) have been critical informants.

This paper is not about what kind of information should be written on a label, style guidelines or reading ages. It is about the processes and methodologies that are currently in use within organisations in order to arrive at the text that makes it onto a label.

In the following section, I outline a brief history of research into the visitor's relationship with museum and gallery labels. I pose the question 'is the subject specialist the best person to write the label?' and explore the nature and changing meaning of expertise. I examine what the key issues are in relation to threats posed to the power base by working in more open and transparent ways.

Following on from this, a selection of case studies are presented to highlight the various responses to the thorny issue of improving interpretation across the sector. This information has been provided by colleagues working within a variety of contrasting museum and gallery environments,

with different agendas and constraints governing the ways in which they have approached interpretative methodologies. Each is represented here as an example of good practice rather than best practice; no one methodology is ever going to be applicable across the sector and I do not wish to declare that we should all try to do our interpretation the way it's currently being done at Nottingham Contemporary! This is not a 'how to' handbook or a list of top ten tips.

The case studies (from Glasgow Museums, The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, Nottingham Contemporary, the British Museum and the New Art Gallery Walsall) are a mixture of Local Authority, National and University museums, some of which incorporated new interpretative models into a capital build/ rebuild and some who reconsidered their approach to interpretation out of resource related necessity.

These organisations have been selected for various reasons. I chose some because I knew that they had tried something new or different in their approach to interpretation. Others I had not come across before but were recommended. In addition to this, they represent examples of good practice in their approach. Lastly, they represent contrasting aspects of the sector and have been quite intentionally juxtaposed here. What has worked in a Local Authority setting may not (some would argue) work in a University Museum or a Contemporary Art Gallery. What these studies signify is that it is possible to move to new and more collaborative approaches to writing text regardless of constitutional constraints.

Each study is comprised of an account of how the organisation approached interpretation, their use of external consultants, who led the process, how decisions were made, how dissent was overcome and what issues arose as the process evolved.

In the final section, I examine some of the key issues (which I refer to as collaborative traps) brought to the fore in the studies. These issues do not represent traps that the named organisations fell into (far from it). I believe them to represent some of the frequently used excuses for not attempting to work more openly and collaboratively. Implementing new ways of working takes time and is often an uneasy transition however it seems that some vital mind-set shifts are required if we are to move coherently in a lucrative interpretative direction.

A key motivator for me here is asking myself the question 'how can we make the most of what we have?' I think there is a lot of untapped knowledge in the museum and gallery part of the cultural sector and it is often overlooked because of the tendency that we have to prize very specific manifestations of knowledge and expertise (in society). This is worthy of being challenged in the 21st century.

In *The Participatory Museum,* Nina Simon points out that 'users voices can inform and invigorate project design and public facing programmes' (Simon 2010: ii). Simon goes on to say that participatory strategies don't replace but rather enhance, traditional institutions and that there are levels of public dissatisfaction because people feel that:

> "1/Cultural institutions are irrelevant to my life
> 2/The Institution never changes
> 3/The authoritative voice does not include my view or give me context for understanding what is being presented.
> 4/This institution is not a creative place where I can express myself and contribute to history, science and art.
> 5/This institution is not a comfortable social place for me to talk about ideas with friends and strangers." (Simon 2010: iii-iv)

Most of these points could well be opinions that are shared by members of staff within the organisation. What of their views about relevance, change, creativity and the authoritative voice? Are the outward facing messages that are transmitted via public information (leaflets, floor plans, signage and particularly the labels accompanying the exhibits) being informed and invigorated by the diverse voices within the walls?

The interpretative journey

Before thinking about who should be doing the writing and how they could be doing it, it is worth taking some time to think about who is reading all these words.

As Falk and Dierking comment ‘it would take an average adult reader days or weeks to read every label in even a medium sized museum’ (Falk and Dierking 1992: 73). This comment highlights a critical issue: it is very difficult to extrapolate meaningful information from the statistical averages produced by researching the label reading habits of museum and gallery visitors. Attempts to do so have been made since the early 20th century.

Early pioneers of museum visitor behaviour research (Edward Stevens Robinson, a professor of psychology at Yale, and his student Arthur W. Melton) focussed upon how visitors allocated time in front of exhibits. As the 20th century progressed, this area of research expanded to include the ‘attracting power’ of exhibits. Research methodologies involved direct observation of visitor behaviour. However, the results of this methodology largely fall into the realm of commonsense: visitors either choose to spend time looking at exhibits or they don’t. Similarly, visitors either opt to read a label or they walk on.

When reduced to statistical averages, results can be problematic. Such analysis will tell us that ‘...visitors spend, on average, only a few seconds reading a particular label.’ (Falk and Dierking 1992: 70) Back in the real world, it would be fair to say that some people read labels and some people do not! It would also be fair to say that no visitors read absolutely everything (for the above mentioned reason that it would simply take too long. Frequent visitors are aware of this and first time visitors often find out the hard way...).

The results of research based upon label reading habits vary depending upon the point during a visit that the research was conducted. Conclusions usually suggest that most visitors do read labels but nobody reads everything and that any reading that does take place usually occurs in the first twenty to thirty minutes of a visit. Research around label reading habits has been consistently added to; much has been written about style, length, reading ages and use of technical jargon (see chapters 16-19 of Hooper Greenhill’s [ed.] ‘The Education Role of the Museum’ 1994).

Labels are a bit like departments. Both can help us make sense of things and impose some sense of order on objects and people. At one time, both may have appeared to be the most logical and rational means of internal arrangement. Historically, labels have appealed to declarative memory (artist, title, date, medium). More frequently now, an appeal to non-declarative memory is asserting itself; these might be labels that include a question or an invitation to reflect upon a specific aspect of the artwork in such a way that encourages the visitor/viewer to examine their place in the world and their behaviour towards specific notions or ideas. (for more in-depth analysis of declarative and non-declarative memory see Anna Cutler’s ‘What is to be done, Sandra?, Tate Papers 2010)

Another approach (commonly found in the interpretation of contemporary art) is to leave the label as minimal as possible and provide the visitor with a hand held exhibition guide that can be taken away.

In recent years, a number of studies have provided insight into what kind of written interpretation should appear on the labels, wall panels and booklets. Museums and Galleries have increasingly worked with external consultants, exhibition designers and interpretation specialists to tease out rich and varied stories held within collections and to determine what the unified voice of the organisation is (or should sound like). The case studies for Glasgow Museums and The Ashmolean will demonstrate how this process can work and what the results can be.

There are increasing examples of the home nations and regions providing interpretation in their own languages (Welsh, Irish, Scots, Gaelic, Doric and Cornish to name a few). Many of these examples have been the result of an audience consultation process. Robert Burns Birthplace Museum is a recent example of the use of Scots in its interpretative displays and is also included as a case study.

There are plenty of resources out there for guidance about how to write, what to write, which tense to use or how long a sentence should be. Oddly, I think, this plethora of advice is not matched with anything that looks into who should do the writing.

Whose words are they anyway?

Written interpretation is a contested area of responsibility in museums and galleries. The traditional approach (and view) is that the words accompanying any object or painting on display are the preserve of the collection specialist and shall be written by them, and them alone. Free access and diversified funding streams over the last ten years have seen an exponential increase in visitor numbers and a concurrent drive for better provision for those visitors. Outward facing departments such as visitor services, education and communications have flourished as a result.

It could be argued, then, that received wisdom *would have us believe* that curators or collection specialists should write the labels. However, labels are a central part of the visitor experience (an often overlooked factor, which has been emphasised by almost all those who have participated in this research). Many other personnel across the organisation are deeply involved in the visitor experience; information desk staff, gallery assistants, security staff and education staff spend most of their time working directly with the public or planning how to ensure the visitor experience is the best it can be.

The power base, however, usually resides with collections. In most cases the authority to define a museum collection in words also resides with curators, subject specialists or collection specific staff. Those who write the catalogue essay, present the academic paper in the form of a lecture or

spend years researching an area of interest specific to them as an individual also write the text that goes on the wall next to the exhibit.

Several differing approaches to who writes the text and how it is done have been proposed. Some organisations work with external consultants or have interpretation editors. (In some instances an interpretation team is in place, as is the case at the British Museum.) The purpose of this is often to establish a unified (not to be read as uniform) voice for the organisation as well as to ensure that text is clearly written and can be easily understood, or conforms to agreed institutional goals about which audience the text is intended for.

Such organisations have in some capacity, taken heed of the research that has been conducted over the last 80 years into visitor habits. Whatever processes are currently in use, almost all without exception start from the position of one person writing the text. There is a single point of origin. That point of origin is nearly always the curator. Some galleries even list the name of the curator responsible for writing the text on the label itself.

Having originated with a curator/expert/specialist, text is then subjected to an editorial process. This linear solution (curator- editor - design), intended to diminish the divide between the curatorial and educational role of the museum, appears to have inadvertently driven a larger wedge between the two functions (in some cases).

This trajectory (subject specialist as originator of text proceeding in a linear fashion to an editor, interpretation officer or member of education before being returned however many times necessary to the point of origin) might well benefit from being turned on its head.

In the publishing industry, a new word entry for a dictionary is analysed and defined by a lexicographer. In the case of very specialised vocabulary (for example, a chemistry reference dictionary), a subject specialist will be consulted at different stages of the process: they may be asked to provide ‘candidates’ (words) or to confirm that specific words are used in their field. They may also be asked to provide background information on the word, from which a lexicographer can glean information on its usage. They are sometimes asked to read over definitions to ensure accuracy yet they do not get the last word. The role of the specialist is acknowledged and respected yet the origins of a definition do not reside with them.

This could serve as an appropriate model to draw upon for museum and gallery interpretation. The British Museum do, on occasion, come close to this model to their interpretation. It is not however a blanket procedure. (This will be discussed in more detail later.)

Surely the label text, wall panels and information booklets are pieces of public information and not the intellectual property of the creator/curator? Once a visitor has entered the building, surely it is

to be hoped that alongside engaging with staff, the single most important aspect of the visit will be engaging with the collection? And that engagement with the collection will be complemented with helpful and informative writing on the wall beside or nearby?

In order to be helpful and informative, we are dependent upon knowing not only about the object or painting that is the focus of the visitor's experience, but also upon having a certain amount of knowledge about what kind of things people might want to know. Of course, there are also the things that we cannot know or predict.

Which organisation readily invites its Front of House or Visitor Services team to be involved in the provision of public information? How many are passing the wall panels under the nose of the Marketing team? (Nottingham Contemporary provide an interesting case study in this respect.) There are many relevant voices and finding a means by which they can all be heard does not need to result in a bland, mediocre institutional voice. (Wolverhampton Art Gallery are notable in approaching interpretation in a holistic and bespoke manner; also the subject of a case study.)

Interpretation can be met with hostility from many directions; this may be the result of a less than positive past experience. Some attempts to create interpretation processes or strategies have been known to leave the learning team or interpretation editor feeling bruised. Others leave curators feeling inadequate, as if incapable of creating text that is coherent or legible to the intended audience. There are examples of organisations in the sector who have surpassed these difficulties. However, there are others where the mere suggestion that label text might benefit from being subjected to an editorial process appears to be the root and branch of the issue: a territorial and defensive stand-off can ensue.

Some of the issues developing around interpretation appear to stem from a mutual disrespect between the curatorial and learning professions. While this may not be true of all museums and galleries, it is most certainly the case in many institutions where traditional hierarchies and departmental responsibilities exist.

Falk and Sheppard allude to the territorial nature of these two functions in 'Thriving in the Knowledge Age', quoted in the introduction. One manifestation of the 'battleground' is the binary supposition that curators create bad or elitist interpretation while educators favour a good and democratic approach. (There is of course another binary that should be mentioned; namely, that curators are the arbiters of knowledge, truth, facts and excellence and are known to look down on their colleague educators because they dumb things down and are frequently overheard getting their 'facts' wrong.) These stances are not helpful because there are flaws on both sides: it is not the case that curators constantly spout forth text that is impenetrable to anyone other than a peer and neither is it the case that educators get their facts wrong all the time or dumb down in order to appeal to a wider audience base. Yet, curiously, these are viewpoints that personnel representative

of both sides of the binary seem desperate to cling onto! Positioning curators and educators as polar opposites has not been helpful and will not be constructive in creating more meaningful and relevant interpretation fit for purpose in the knowledge age.

Rather than focus on one side or the other, or to think of this as a two-sided debate, perhaps there are benefits to be had by concentrating upon the space between; a place transcending the silo mentality, enabling colleagues to step out of their respective departments and contribute to a new process by which good interpretation strategies can be developed. This does not need to mean tearing down the walls of the organisation or demanding a top down restructure. It does, however, require a revision of the polarisation that has taken place between the differing functions of the museum/gallery. At least part of the problem appears to evolve around competing notions of expertise.

Expertise and collaboration

Traditionally, labels have been written by the 'experts'. Expertise, in turn, is traditionally identified with the knowledge embodied by the subject specialist of a specific academic discipline. This expertise is revered far more than other forms of expertise. However, it is this notion of expertise that is proving to be problematic and out of date in the global environment that we now find ourselves living in. What it conveniently excludes from the power base is the amassed knowledge and expertise that has built up across the rest of the organisation. To refer once more to Falk and Sheppard's 'Thriving in the Knowledge Age',

> A museum staff is an assembly of talents and responsibilities. Its composition and structure has changed as the museum's mission has turned outward and the business of running a museum has become exponentially more complex. Finding staff with experience and talents that transcend the classical museum roles of curator, registrar, conservator and even educator is challenging. With a growing emphasis on building connections to the outside world, museums require people with whole new sets of skills, both individually and collectively...the business of museums has become increasingly complex, resulting on a greater emphasis on the work of teams rather than individuals. (Falk and Sheppard 2006: 112-113)

In many academic disciplines, much reverence is apportioned to the expertise of the individual. However, James Surowiecki makes the interesting observation that 'Although in the popular imagination science remains the province of the solitary genius working alone in his lab, in fact it is, in more ways than one, a profoundly collaborative enterprise.' Surowiecki goes on to write that '...it's no longer strange to see scientific papers that are co-authored by ten or twenty people. (This is in sharp contrast to the humanities, where single authorship remains the norm.)' (Surowiecki 2004: 161)

The quotes above are drawn from Surowiecki's book 'The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter Than the Few' and are taken from the context of a broader discussion about scientific collaboration. When scientists from different branches of the same discipline or from entirely different disciplines work across organisational or geographical boundaries to achieve a common goal, the results are usually more than the sum of their parts. Identifying a problem, and setting to work on a solution, can happen far more quickly than if the scientists really were working alone in their labs. Collaborative exchange, at its best, sees different forms of expertise working together upon a shared goal, in an open and transparent fashion.

Collaboration, it would seem, is the key to better, smarter, faster results. It is also often a word that makes colleagues shudder. Earlier this year, myself and a colleague from the National Gallery, Emma Rehm, facilitated a conference session at the Museums Galleries Scotland conference. The theme of the conference was 'Collaborating to Compete'; we called our session 'The *C* Word' because we felt that, sometimes, when we talk about working together in equal partnership, it can provoke a response in others so strong that we might as well have just sworn at them.

One of the best definitions of 'collaboration' that I came across was 'to work together on a shared goal to create something that would not otherwise be possible'. In 45 minutes, and with 37 other people, we came up with a roadmap of what was required before setting out upon a collaborative journey with others. The convergence of ideas across the room was perhaps not really all that surprising, despite having been harvested from a multitude of different stories from very different organisations. When pooling the suggestions and ideas together at the end of the session, the common ground around what we need in order to collaborate was clearly demarcated around a number of key concepts: clarity, trust, respect, shared excitement, communication, the negotiated dream.

The point of this exercise was not to come up with some radical new way of 'doing' or 'being' but to make a case for why collaborating can be a great thing to do. I can't help wondering if those who remain sceptical of the benefits of working in teams, partnerships or collaborations are only wary either because they have had negative experiences of them in the past or because of a preconceived notion of the negative side effects of 'design by committee' or 'groupthink'.

Several years ago a colleague commented to me that doing anything by committee was usually very frustrating and time consuming. I understand that stance; many of us can probably recall more than one example of poorly led teamwork, collaboration or facilitation. The trouble is, taking this stance is a surefire way of preventing the exploration of alternative means of doing and being. Expediency has become the norm; why consult and collaborate with close colleagues when it is easier to stay within the comfort of your own circle of authority? As Julia Middleton comments in 'Beyond Authority: Leadership in a changing world', it is easier to stay in the space where you have

worked up a reputation and where you are credible and respected. (Middleton 2007: 18) To step out of that circle or to invite others into it, no matter how tentatively, is a big leap into the unknown.

This may not strike a chord with all readers. However it is often the case in medium to large museums with historical art collections and relatively traditional organisational structures or hierarchies that, once employed, staff tend to stick to their own area of work. Occasionally, working beyond your remit is permitted, or even encouraged. As easily as the momentum builds, it can grind to a halt when you are asked 'by whose authority are you doing this?' or as someone once put it to me: 'what are *you* doing here?'

The other difficulty is that often, with the best will in the world, we enter into what we think are collaborative endeavours that result in nothing more than throwing what we know over a high wall to a colleague who augments with their contribution and throws it back. (And so on until the task is completed or one or other gets too tired, bored or fed up to continue.) Such a process is, I think, typified by the way temporary exhibition programmes are often conceived: curatorial staff define the theme, label and catalogue copy and then public programmes or learning staff must *respond* or *validate* these decisions by creating a meaningful and relevant suite of talks, tours, trails and other resources that will do the interpreting not done via the labels, catalogue and exhibition concept. It is hard not to feel curious about what opportunities are being lost as a result of this sequential, silo-driven process.

The scenario described above could be considered as an art world representation of a non-contributory trading zone; no real attempt is made to understand what is going on over on the other side of the rampart. True, an interaction of sorts is taking place, however it resembles a game of consequences more than it does a collaborative enterprise. The linear trajectories utilised in our planning and decision making often create far from coherent wholes.

The point being made here is really about equity of contribution. Whether it be in relation to academic discipline, or organisational role, the same weight of respect is not afforded to different levels or types of expertise. Certain roles or functions are seen as only being capable of responding to others.

There is a body of academic literature about visitor research and about text writing in museums yet, curiously, it is not having an impact where it is often most needed. The discomfort among many subject specialists of being told that there is a system or process within which it might be a good idea to operate leads to many latching on to platitudes such as 'no-one reads labels anyway'.

Another rather unhelpful stance is represented by Mary Beard when she blogged about her involvement in a museum redisplay:

> '…we have regular meetings to talk about the philosophy lying behind the new galleries - and to get get down to real practical details. What is going to go on the labels? How many words are going to be on the information panels? (We are a university museum - so can we escape the usual modern museum Stalinism.... nothing over 75 words, reading age of 11 and no more than three syllables . . . ?)' (From Mary Beard's Blog, A Don's Life, August 27th 2009 TLS)

This reductionist attitude is not helpful and the thought that a University Museum should be able to do as it pleases somewhat worrying. Resistance to change and renewal, it seems, is often based upon axioms that can no longer be defended.

At a conference held at the V&A in November 2008, Sue Latimer (former Senior Education and Access Curator at Glasgow Museums, involved in Kelvingrove New Century Project interpretation) commented that visitor research and interpretative practice should be given equal authority as the 'undoubted expertise in art history held by curators and critics'. As Latimer hints at, until audience and education research are given equal status with collections research, this is a political, linguistic and social imbalance that is likely to continue.

Equality and Expertise

It has been noted that there is resistance to working more openly and collaboratively, particularly in the museums part of the cultural sector. As Sally Bacon has observed 'The performing arts are so fundamentally an ensemble affair and that has to lead to a different way of working in terms of the functions of an organisation…Collaboration between different functions (artistic, operational, and educational) is so much more at the heart of what a performing organisation is about.' (Bacon 2009: 49)

There are several issues to consider here:

- How do we define expertise?
- How can we enable those with subject specialist expertise to embrace new forms of expertise and collaborate more effectively?
- How can we encourage colleagues to feel more comfortable about 'the letting go'?

These issues around defining expertise, embracing alternative types of expertise and 'the letting go' may have much to do with reputation among peers but I would argue that there is more to it than that.

Resisting Interpretation

There is a widely held assumption that text subjected to any 'new' interpretative process results in a banal, invariant institutional voice. This is a view usually put forward by art critics, often shared by curators who have not themselves been involved in such a process. While it may not be the view

of the majority of readers of labels, their opinions rarely make it onto the pages of Apollo, the Times or the Burlington Magazine. Interestingly, of the organisations consulted as part of this research paper, most were adamant that examining their approaches to interpretation either enabled them to find a stronger voice or to devise a process flexible enough to include and reflect the personalities and characters of individual contributors. Indeed it was found that, where possible, the best approaches enable the voice of the 'expert' to shine through.

Perhaps a little more challenging to overcome is the notion that these 'new' processes present a threat to the existing power base. Those in positions of authority, be that as gatekeeper or critic, do not appreciate the democratisation (often described as popularisation or dumbing down) of culture.

The supposed threat to the existing power base may be in part, due to a perceived conflict between openness and quality. This is pertinent here because, in any discussion of expertise that is likely to cause discomfort to the traditional 'gatekeepers' of cultural quality, it perhaps needs to be more explicitly confirmed that this is not about what Michael Connor so eloquently described as 'beheading the gatekeeper' (Connor 2009:5). In the knowledge age that we now live in, expertise is more prized than ever before. People *want* to know what the experts know. Visitors *want* to meet them, not to experience the transmission of knowledge in a one-way fashion, but to converse, discuss, debate and question it.

It is imperative, however, that the gatekeeper experts approach other forms of expertise with due respect. Nobody is being stripped of their role. What is required is a level playing field with regards to the range of expertise within the organisation. Why, when this point is made, is it interpreted as meaning that those whose expertise is already acknowledged must somehow be expected to lower their status or standards? Is it too difficult to imagine that others might be worthy of elevation? David Anderson commented in 'The Listening Museum' that:

> 'One Head of Research at a major UK national museum told me recently that, in their institution, educators are regarded by many of their collections colleagues as 'staff' - a lower social group not worthy of intellectual or professional respect... the private testimony of a number of senior museum educators in national museums suggests that intellectual disdain for education and visitor research as disciplines and educators as professionals is widespread and persistent...)' (Anderson 2009:33)

Intellectual disdain for colleagues with knowledge and experience of visitor motivation and habits or about different learning styles or communication techniques is quite possibly holding us all back. Rather than annexing such knowledge or permitting its peripheral existence, on the margins of organisational life, this expertise should be brought in from the cold.

This does not need to require a radical restructure of staff. Thinking logically about which aspect of a museum or gallery experience might benefit from an interaction between subject specialist, visitor services, marketing and education functions, I am drawn to the labels. To borrow again from the language of trading zones, a label could be seen as a 'boundary object' around which different forms of expertise interact and creolise in order to maximise the potential of all forms of expertise extant within the organisation. (Let us not forget that the ultimate aim of this is to provide our visitors with the best possible experience we are capable of.)

The compartmentalised distribution of roles that prevent these interactions and creoles from coming into being is beginning to show its weaknesses and more effective leadership of collaborative processes is required. That, surely, will enable us to amount to more than the sum of our parts.

We must all take some responsibility for the prevailing attitudes towards roles and expertise. The binary divide has not helped move our thinking out of the boxes we have been so neatly packaged into. As I said earlier, there are flaws and faults on both sides of the binary. Affecting the changes within the organisations and within the frameworks that govern how we make decisions has to start with us.

A final thought from John H. Falk and Beverley K. Sheppard:

> In Museums, we often talk about our stakeholders- usually quite abstractly, as if they are the 'others'. We think in terms of the parents and children, the researchers and scholars, the teachers and classrooms, all who come through our doors. In fact, our stakeholders include an even more familiar group. They are all of us as well- staff, volunteers and board members. We are all part of the fast changing world that is building our new museum paradigm. Our ability to find new ways to work together and shift into new models is critical to the future of museums. Successful change really must begin with us. (Falk and Shepperd 2006: 122)

So who *should* be doing the writing and how *could* it be done? The writing on the wall is arguably the most important use of words in the museum; certainly the most widely *read* and with the widest reader base in terms of age, background knowledge and familiarity with museum context. How can one author be expected to satisfy the needs of such a diverse readership? The next section of this paper features seven case studies demonstrating different solutions to the text writing question.

Study 1

Glasgow Museums Interpretation as a transition from analysis to story-telling

Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum closed to the public in 2003 for a major capital redevelopment. The Kelvingrove New Century Project set out to create a museum fit for the 21st century. When the museum reopened in 2006, the building had been refurbished and the collections redisplayed. A storytelling, themed approach was adapted in favour of the use of traditional taxonomies.

The interpretation process was led by Education and Access staff. Research Managers were each allocated one quarter of Kelvingrove to oversee (taking some out of their own particular area of expertise). Curators responsible for specific collections were involved in liaising with the Education and Access staff and the Research Managers. Curators were, in most cases, responsible for generating the text.

Interpretation was just one facet of this complex capital project. Prior to closure, front of house and learning staff conducted visitor research with focus groups to gauge responses to stories and themes that had been generated by staff. In addition to this a pilot story was presented in the McLellan Galleries (where some of the treasures of Kelvingrove were displayed during the redevelopment) and audience research was conducted by a designated team of researchers. This process informed which stories and themes were presented in the redisplay.

Meanwhile staff from across the organisation (Curators, Research Managers, Editors and Education and Access staff) participated in text writing workshops with interpretation consultant James Carter.

Text was written by individual curators. Who wrote what was dependent upon which curator had come up with a specific story. Where some curators were responsible for disproportionate numbers of stories, text writing was taken on by another curator. So, most of the writing was done by the subject specialist responsible for generating the story and for that particular area of the museum's collection. On occasion, when it was not the subject specialist writing the label, the writing was done with reference to the relevant curator or research manager.

Any group work that did take place involved the curator liaising with the Research Manager responsible for a specific quarter of the building plus the education and access staff involved in leading the process. These group decisions evolved around what amount of text was needed (or what there was space for) rather than content.

Once written, the initial text was circulated to the Research Manager and the relevant Education and Access staff. Comments were raised and the text was worked on until all were agreed about

the format. At this point the text went to an editor for a final check. Occasional problems arose; sometimes the agreed text did not fit the label size and changes were made and approved without consulting all the initial stakeholders in the process. This was largely due to time constraints.

Where lack of agreement occurred, a compromise would be sought. If this were not possible, the New Century Project Manager would take the role of adjudicator.

This process required a different form of teamwork than had existed before and must also be seen within the context of a complex capital project where key personnel were responsible for multiple simultaneous areas of redevelopment.

Study 2

Ashmolean **Interpretation and stakeholder relationships**

The Ashmolean is the University of Oxford's Museum of Art and Archaeology and is the oldest public museum in the UK.

Between 2006 and 2009, the Museum underwent a major redevelopment and building programme resulting in the creation of 39 new gallery spaces over 5 floors. As with Kelvingrove, a new approach to interpretation was only one facet of a large and complex capital development project.

The interpretation process was led by the education department and the museum worked with external consultants (Tim Gardom Associates) throughout. The Ashmolean process involved staff workshops with the consultants, the development of a text toolkit, text maps, and a text plan for each gallery.

A prototype gallery was created in order for those involved in the text writing process and their colleagues to see how things would look and feel in the final design and to discuss what did and did not work about the proposed format and procedures.

Helen Ward, Deputy Head of Education, led the process between 2007 and 2009 and described planning as being paramount to the evolution of the project. The prototype gallery (based upon the Museum's Minoan collections) enabled colleagues to determine the importance of having a key message (as well as what that key message was). A plan was then written for each gallery, the learning outcomes were clarified (done with reference to the five Generic Learning Outcomes as outlined in the ILFA {Inspiring Learning for All} framework), and curators were encouraged to ask themselves 'what do you want people to get out of visiting this gallery?'

The same template was applied across all galleries. Key audiences were identified as part of this process. However, Ward also points out that this was not a uniform process and that galleries can (and do) have their own personalities. Ward also points out that text is only one element of the overall desired interpretative impact. How objects are positioned (in proximity to other objects and in relation to the piece of text that accompanies them) was also a major consideration.

Whilst the text plans and maps were created by education staff, the writing of the text was done by curators. This then followed a linear text-editing process. Text was passed from curator to educator and returned to curator (sometimes as often as five times).

A striking feature of the completed project is that, on a walk around the Ashmolean, it is evident that some galleries have had interpreters who chose to work with the text toolkits in varied ways. (It is also evident that some galleries have not worked with them at all.) As Ward comments

‘personalities shine through’. There seems to be no evidence to suggest the greatly feared ‘invariant institutional voice’ here.

As with Kelvingrove, timing and design presented some problems. Ward reflects that more time to examine the design mock up would have been helpful. These two issues (design and timing) do appear to be particular sticking points of the type of process used in the redevelopment of both Kelvingrove and the Ashmolean.

Ward acknowledges the difficulties with keeping multiple stakeholders happy and the particular difficulties of being a University Museum. When not working specifically to a local authority agenda (where key performance indicators such as social inclusion and access may be identified as priorities) and when working in partnership with academic stakeholders, it can be even more difficult to keep all the views and opinions coalescing in a creative and audience focussed way. This is also true of temporary exhibition programming within an organisation that has been through a process such as the one implemented at the Ashmolean.

Study 3

Wolverhampton Art Gallery Interpretation as a shared responsibility

Wolverhampton Art Gallery is part of Wolverhampton Arts and Museums Service. Collection strengths are in pop and contemporary art, which are displayed in a modern extension attached to the 19th century main building. A recently refurbished Victorian gallery is located on one side of the original building, opposite the Georgian gallery which was opened to the public in January 2003.

There are several spaces within the museum for temporary exhibitions and displays. At the time of writing, the temporary exhibitions were Artists Rooms: Ed Ruscha, Traced: Art and Design in Wolverhampton and the BP portrait Award.

What is striking and refreshing about the interpretation is that there is no uniformity of approach. Interpretation does not follow a rigid or dictatorial formula of style, length, appearance or type of information. In some galleries, written information is minimal whereas in others, far more is on offer. The gallery tries to avoid a formulaic approach to interpretation.

Wolverhampton Art Gallery's approach to interpretation has evolved over the last decade. With the first round of Renaissance funding made available in 2004, the Gallery appointed its first Interpretation and Access co-ordinator. Prior to the creation of this post, it had been the responsibility of the Education Officer to edit text. Renaissance funding enabled the Interpretation post to continue for about three years before this role was phased out as resources were cut back.

In the case of Wolverhampton, the benefit of having this post appears to have been that it acted as a catalyst for change across the organisation. There was a period of time where all text writing was passed through this pivotal role; one of the results of this process was that there was a gradual shift across the organisation in its approach to text writing.

The role was phased out in 2008. A reduction in funding required the organisation to redefine its priorities and a concurrent shift away from the model of having an interpretation editor to create the overall voice. Marguerite Nugent, curator at the gallery, now describes an organisation more readily able to embrace the challenges of devising innovative interpretation on a bespoke basis. This does not follow a strategy or interpretation plan as such; there is no need because interpretation has become embedded as a shared responsibility across the organisation and is discussed by an interdisciplinary staff team from the outset of every project.

What is interesting about the approach in Wolverhampton is that the effort is concentrated around the project management process. Any exhibition proposal or project that the team work on will usually (not always) begin two years in advance. Round table discussions about the key themes of the project and how the interpretation will unfold are held right from the start. Text still has a sole

author but that author participates in a project management process that includes voices representative of curatorial, education, marketing and operations.

Text is only one means by which the message can be communicated (true of all other case studies here too). The Artists Rooms exhibition featured the use of Ipad technology, not to communicate written messages but simply to enable the visitor to flick through the artist's books displayed in the glass vitrine. This was in stark contrast to the lengthy written labels featured in Traced: Art and Design in Wolverhampton, an exhibition conceived to appeal to audiences in a different kind of way than Artists Rooms.

The Georgian Gallery, the least recent to have been interpreted, features an experiential approach to interpretation. Labels for paintings are brief and most feature longer 'labels' storied discretely in wall slots below each visible label. The gallery features stations distributed across the floorspace where visitors can encounter the key themes of the displays in varied ways.

Study 4

Robert Burns Birthplace Museum Interpretation to 'show, not tell'

The village of Alloway in South Ayrshire is home to a host of Robert Burns related experiences: the cottage the poet was born in, the Auld Kirk and Brig o' Doon which both feature in Burns epic Tam O'Shanter. A new museum, The Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, opened to the public in November 2010. Home to the world's best collection of Burns' life and work and part of the Burns National Heritage Park, the museum is connected to the rest of the heritage site by the 'Poet's Path', a route through the village linking different aspects of the site together.

The interpretation approach adapted for the new museum is a continuation of that used to redisplay Burns' cottage in 2009. Following the principle of 'show, not tell', the contents of the cottage are not labelled in any traditional sense. Scots words and phrases are transcribed onto the walls, and occasionally onto objects throughout the displays.

Interpretation and interpretative design were at the core of the new museum project from the outset. The exhibition designers (Event Communication) included an interpretation specialist on their team, an Interpretation manager was seconded to the project from NTS (National Trust for Scotland) a Scots language specialist panel was consulted as text was developed and part of the conditions of the funding (HLF) were that an interpretation advisory group and project monitor would be involved. Design, interpretation, curatorial perspectives and language specialists working together from the start.

Interpretation flowed from discussions between the project team and the majority of the text was originated by the project curator and the seconded interpretation manager. The Interpretation manager worked as a central co-ordinator and the curator and interpretation manager shared the text writing. The text was then shared with others on the project team for comments and amendments. Although text was written by one person, this took place after discussion. Nat Edwards, Director of the Museum and project leader of the redevelopment describes it as having been a 'fairly open process'.

Edwards, feels that the process did not result in much dissent or disagreement around final proofs. Regular interpretation meetings took place where all parties involved were able to put forward individual views about the process and this facilitated the collaborative nature of the project.

Edwards is a strong advocate for a 'show, not tell' interpretative philosophy. Curators (and other authors of text) should be encouraged to 'slaughter their darlings' for the benefit of the narrative and for the reader.

Edwards felt that the collaborative group work approach to producing the text for a project of this nature was far more flexible and responsive than a linear writer to editor to print model would have been. He does add to this that ‘a really effective collaborative group encourages a creative voice - a bad one produces anodyne committee-speak.’

Study 5

Nottingham Contemporary Interpretation involving every aspect of an organisation

Nottingham Contemporary is a temporary exhibitions gallery and has no permanently exhibited collection. It is a young organisation, having opened to the public in 2009 and therefore has little archival history.

The remit and nature of the gallery requires being dynamic as well as working with living artists who have a stake in what is written about their work. A key distinction between this case study and the others featured here is that, in this context, the object is not divorced from its maker. A key consideration when approaching the interpretation is that many artists do not want to have a reading imposed upon their work.

That said, Director Alex Farquharson does comment that a lot of artists do really care about the difference between having an exhibition in a place like Nottingham Contemporary compared to a commercial gallery with a contrasting intended audience. Farquharson adds that sometimes the artists voice is best and that it can be a really important dimension for the audience; they often wish to get as close to the maker as possible. For example, a recent David Hockney exhibition featured interpretation written by Hockney himself, in the 1970s, and was provided as 'hooks' for the visitors.

Farquharson describes an interpretative process that requires setting out by asking the question 'do we need to write this at all?'. Nottingham Contemporary adapt different approaches depending upon the exhibition. At first, all exhibits were labelled and the labels were relatively text dense. Then the organisation moved to a more typical contemporary art interpretation model: baseline text appears as an introduction to the exhibition and art works are accompanied by brief labels. The main exhibition text takes the form of notes that a visitor carries around with them (and can take away with them if they wish to. This is quite deliberately entitled 'Exhibition Notes' rather than 'Exhibition Guide'). It is how this text is arrived at that is of interest here.

A frequently used methodology at Nottingham Contemporary is that interpretation germinates in conversation. The Head of Communications will 'interview' the Director, or lead colleague from exhibitions and then writes the text which is then returned to the 'interviewee' to edit. This process is described as 'open-ended discussion' that may result in a tussle over the odd word but is largely collaborative and respectful.

This demonstrates a high level of commitment to integrating different functions within the organisation. Farquharson describes the role of Head of Communications as being much broader than that of marketing alone: the 'communicative role goes beyond selling something to prospective customers'. By the time colleagues sit down to talk about the exhibition interpretation

together, there has already been a great deal of collaboration upon the text approved for press purposes. Although that text will differ in its content, a shared sense of purpose and structure will exist.

If a shared set of values for the art and the audience exists across the organisation, this vision should filter through to every level of a project. This sense of shared ownership seems a vital component to interpretation at the gallery. Farquharson comments that, organisationally, it is a recipe for disaster for curators to assume that their main role is intellectual responsibility for the art and content and that the marketing/communications role is to get people through the door. Curators should write in good faith and start by asking themselves:
‘What are the key themes and how can I convey them as clearly as possible without selling out?’

As referenced above, if there are shared values across the organisation, and if respect and equality are reflected in the nature of the organisation, these values should cascade down and include approaches taken to create interpretation quite naturally.

Study 6

The British Museum Interpretation as an experimental, evolving tool

The British Museum opened to the public in 1759. The founding collections comprised books, manuscripts, natural history and some antiquities and ethnographic material. The collections have increased ever since, by way of gifts and acquisitions. The building has similarly expanded, to cope with the increasing collections and to provide an enhanced public service.

These expanded public services extend beyond the physical walls. The museum has had significant broadcasting success with 'A History of the World in 100 Objects'; new means of communicating and asserting its relevance and place in the 21st century are constantly under examination.

Editorial roles at the British Museum were initially placed within the Exhibitions department. In 2004 an Interpretation unit was created and the function was transferred across to the Education department (now known as the department of Learning, Access and Audience).

Staff from the Interpretation team have extensive input into the temporary exhibitions planning and the development of new gallery displays. Unsurprisingly, for an organisation of its size, ideas about interpretation are not shared across the organisation. Systems and processes do exist however they are adaptable and are not slavishly adhered to. There are some departments who continue to 'do their own thing'.

The general process at work in the museum is that a scoping exercise leads to a section planning document (which itemises all panels and labels and the themes that they cover) before text writing begins. The Head of Interpretation signs off the scope and then the delivery of narrative, section planning and text writing is led by the Interpretation Officer.

Style guidelines, reading age, length of sentence and type of information to be covered is flexible and developed on a project by project basis.

Curators usually generate text although there have been occasions where it is the interpretation team who begin drafting text that is based upon notes taken during conversations or with the assistance of bullet pointed information provided by a curator.

Gallery 3 in the museum features small, changing and experimental displays. One such display was based around three Rembrandt prints (from the same plate, shown in three different states). Having been involved in a discussion between the Director and the Curator of Prints and Drawings, Interpretation Officer Claire Edwards prepared the text for the exhibition and this was then

approved by the Director and Curator. Edwards explains that the changing displays in Gallery 3 allow the Museum to experiment with ‘different tones of voice’.

Edwards also explains that where the text is generated by a curator, it is edited by the Interpretation Officer and resubmitted to the curator. There then follows several sessions where curator and interpretation editor work together (often sitting side by side in front of a mac) to agree a final version.

For other temporary exhibitions and gallery redisplays, the process varies depending upon the preferred exchange of individual personalities. When Curator and Interpretation officer are happy with the text, the text goes to the Head of Interpretation, Head of Exhibitions and Departmental Keeper for comments before being send to the Director. A two-week period is allowed for this.

For an organisation of its size, with a collection of such breadth, there is a high level of commitment to interpretation that extends right to the top. As Edwards comments, ‘the only way you have a voice is if you are supported at the highest level’.

Study 7

New Art Gallery Walsall **Interpretation as a process that validates other voices**

The New Art Gallery Walsall is home to the Garman Ryan Collection (formed by Kathleen Garman, widow of Sir Jacob Epstein, and her friend Sally Ryan, a Sculptor and Art collector). The collection comprises works by Epstein and a range of European artists including Dürer, Constable and Van Gogh as well as work by unknown artists from different cultures. The Gallery is home to the Epstein Archive of letters and photographs and also has a rolling programme of temporary exhibitions. Some of these exhibitions are devised by staff at Walsall and others are touring exhibitions for which the gallery is a receiving venue.

Deborah Robinson, Head of Exhibitions, explains that the text writing process begins early in the development of a project. The initial writing about and description of a new project will be directed internally, for the benefit of staff, however it is the case that all future text tends to evolve from it (press, marketing and interpretation materials). This usually happens two years before an exhibition will open. However, due to the nature of working with contemporary artists who may be developing new work, the interpretative text forming part of the exhibition must be written at a very late stage in the process.

Robinson describes the approach at Walsall as being project driven: the approach or strategy employed usually evolves out of the project. Generally speaking a temporary exhibition will have an introductory panel on the gallery wall and will be accompanied by an exhibition guide in the form of a leaflet.

Text originates in a variety of ways at Walsall. The exhibition project lead will be involved however, it is often the voice of the artist that a visitor will engage with. For example, in 2011, Bob and Roberta Smith curated the exhibition ‘The Life of the Mind’ using artworks drawn from the historical collection and archive at the Gallery as well as contemporary art lent to the show and some pieces specifically commissioned for it. Exhibitions staff at Walsall felt it was important that ‘Bob’s voice came through’. The Life of the Mind was a large group show and Bob wrote label signs by hand for each artist; these were incorporated into the exhibition. Bob’s voice was tempered by the voice of staff.

The approach at Walsall is one that supports validation of the voice of others. Robinson makes specific reference to wishing to move away from the ‘authoritative voice’ and adds ‘Why should the visitor always have to hear my voice?’

Robinson also makes the very good point that use of the personal voice is a good way of validating the voices and opinions of others. In an exhibition of Gary Hume’s work, Hume’s partner Deborah Curtis provided the exhibition guide text and it was printed as a handwritten document including

drawings and diagrams within the text. Curtis is very familiar with Hume's work and this personal touch within the overall interpretative framework is a device that Walsall has adopted on other occasions too. What is more, it moves away from the written interpretation taking the from of print, in black and white, which tends to feel authoritative (to the reader).

Robinson, like others interviewed for this paper, was very clear that the written word is only one aspect of the interpretative approach. A standard for each exhibition is an introductory piece of wall text and a leaflet guide. There is also an area on the ground floor where books can be read and a video is screened. Most exhibitions feature artists' talks; these are recorded and are then available to listen to via the Gallery's website. The Gallery is also home to an art library. This was clearly described by Robinson as providing a visitor with a variety of means and levels at which engagement with the exhibitions could be facilitated. Interpretation is multi-layered and takes into account a variety of preferred styles.

There is a variety of approach at Walsall yet what is clear is that a great deal of thought goes into how to create an interpretative framework for each project. Some projects need more support than others and Robinson also reminds us of this caveat: do not let the interpretation become more important than the work itself.

Springing from the collaborative traps

Each organisation featured in the case studies came up with a different way of addressing the interpretative issues they faced whether in relation to a capital redevelopment, temporary exhibition or new display. There were commonalities and a great deal of congruence around the issues that materialised along the way and I would like to focus upon those issues and how they might be overcome, with reference to the case studies, in the following section of this paper. I identified three potential traps that can prevent us from attempting new approaches to interpretation (fear of the institutional, unvariegated voice, threat to the power base and a perceived conflict between openness and quality). I would like to keep these three traps and their interconnectedness in mind throughout the rest of this paper. I would also like to add a fourth consideration: what does it take to lead an interpretative process that successfully integrates many different forms of expertise?

From Institutional Voice to Vocal Range

There is little evidence suggesting these processes harvest bland results. However, art critics rarely have positive things to say, the most common complaint being that interpretation is *banal* or *bland*. Richard Dorment, reviewing the Ashmolean in the Telegraph, congratulated the architect of the new building and the Director of the Museum yet had this to say about the interpretation:

> As for labelling and presentation: for the display of a permanent collection I dislike themed galleries with didactic wall labels. I guess they are OK for children, but they limit both the curator's ability to reconfigure the display and the viewer's capacity to interact with the objects without being told what to think. So, themed displays like East Meets West waste almost as much space as the dreadful Welcome Galleries at the British Museum.
> On the other hand, some of these thematic wall labels are so banal that they really can't be accused of telling anyone anything... (Dorment 2009)

This revealing remark carries a number of assumptions; that thematic, didactic labels work for children, that the lack of flexibility restricts the curator (presumably in terms of any future changes they might wish to make), that visitors are told what to think. Dorment writes about what he, the art critic, would wish to see, read and experience. This is part of the problem: if it is not what the critic (and for critic read expert) wants to read, then it is banal.

A counterargument of sorts is put forward by Charlotte Higgins who wrote earlier this year that

> The best museums – or rather, the ones I love the best – do indeed have "bland" labels. A label that tells one where and when an object was made, with some more or less brief illustration of its purpose and place in the world, which will also be illuminated by the context in which it has been placed by the curator. It probably

> will not be accompanied by a screen, a hologram, a recording of voices or a costumed interpreter, which I know flies in the face of a lot of modern museology, but there it is, that's just boring old me. (Higgins 2011)

Here, it is the analytic, academic voice that is bland, although cited in this case as a good thing. Higgins comment was in relation to Alain de Botton's broadcast on BBC Radio 4 *A Point of View: Why are Museums so uninspiring?* and was in direct response to de Botton's thoughts on what kind of information might be better suited to a label. I take it slightly out of context here; my point is how can we ever write something that will appear to be informative, exciting, original and thought provoking to absolutely everyone who reads it? I imagine never, but that we might stand a better chance of getting closer to that goal if we find ways of bringing groups of creative, imaginative colleagues together to work on such a shared objective.

The ambitious projects represented in the case studies by the Ashmolean and Glasgow Museums set out to do exactly that: bring groups of creative and imaginative colleagues together. It is unlikely that either organisation would deny that there were times when this was not easy; by its nature a process like this will not be. Let's remember that, upon reopening, both Museums were well received by visitors and in 2007, Kelvingrove received an Interpret Britain Award for its 'clear, concise and engaging' interpretation.

Two capital developments, many contrasting views. Both organisations engaged in lengthy and in-depth consultation and training in arriving at their interpretation plans. Both involved identifying different audience groups with whom they wished to engage. For Kelvingrove, the range extended through pre 5s to non expert adults. For the Ashmolean, a similar range was identified with additional reference to the wide ranging knowledge levels and experiences among different segmentations and reference to adult visitors with specialist knowledge. The negative responses to both Kelvingrove and the Ashmolean, almost without exception, emanate from the same quarter; that of the critic or 'expert' peer.

This criticism is often misguided. Those doing the criticising forget that whilst they are free to represent themselves (as is acknowledged in Higgins' comment) and their own peer group, that is absolutely not the aim of an organisation that has consciously engaged in a devised interpretation plan. A label is not the place for a specialist to demonstrate everything they know; nor is it the place for their peers to assess the sum total of a curator's knowledge on a particular subject or object. Frustratingly, that is often the elephant in the room when it comes to museum interpretation: Specialists are judged by their peers. One interviewee commented to me that it is often the case that older curators with established reputations are often more likely to agree to experiment with interpretation whereas younger colleagues will be anxious about taking such risks if their academic reputation is yet to be established.

Identifying who the intended audience for an exhibition, label or event will be forms the basis of good practice. Perhaps we need to add another consideration into our planning processes: We spend a lot of time thinking about who are are writing for. Should we be clearer about who we are *not* writing for?

Specialists can, quite by accident, write for peers. Similarly, critics can forget that the labels they so detest may not have been written with them specifically in mind. The writing of a label serves a very different purpose than an academic paper or an exhibition review. It is evident that many curators and collection specialists write for their own peers yet what motivates them to do so may be more complex (peer pressure rather than a desire to only engage with people like themselves?). It saddens me that many of those who have been held in high regard for their expertise, either as collections specialist or critic, should feel pressured or cannot find it within themselves to be a little more generous of spirit towards visitors who come into these public spaces of their own free will and may not be carrying around the same levels of in depth-knowledge or familiarity. As much as Charlotte Higgins enjoys an old fashioned museum label, the wrong messages can be given out through the use of passive, academic language.

Impersonal academic language has been known to create comprehension difficulties as is explained by Helen Coxall in 'Museum text as mediated message' (Coxall 1990). Coxall describe the ways in which the constructed language of the dominant group effectively mutes all those who do not belong to that group. Impersonal analytic language may work for those who are 'in the know' but what about everyone else? What damage is being done by effectively silencing or, worse still, alienating the rest of us?

It makes sense then, does it not, to bring different voices, into the mix?

In fact, the Ashmolean approach developed around a sensitivity to different voices; the project lead made specific connections between the perceived success of the process and its ability to enable individual personalities to 'shine through'. An interesting aside to the Ashmolean process is that some departments who were not directly part of the 'Crossing Cultures Crossing Time' project have been influenced (even if with the lightest of touch) by the text process implemented as part of that project.

My observation that some of the fine art labels depart from the conventional order in which information is usually presented led to the project lead explaining that the labels I referred to were written after the project had taken place and that, indeed, the individual personality of the writer could be detected. (The label in question opens with a short paragraph telling the story in the painting before giving art historical context. For those who wish it, the context is there however the label opens with a 'hook'; the reader is immersed in the narrative, the story - a key way in which many of use make meaning of the world around us. Dorment, no doubt, would disapprove.)

In devising their approach to interpretation, the Ashmolean did consider what the 'Ashmolean Voice' should be and came up with the following defining characteristics:

As a museum:

- **Narrative-driven**
- **Simple and inclusive**
- **Open, questioning, engaging, personal**
- **Enthusiastic**
- **Learning is carried lightly**

And within the context of the University

As a university:

- **How do we know?**
- **Debate**
- **Connections**
- **Alternative voices**

It is not my intention to criticise the Ashmolean here; in fact, considering the multi-layered complexities of being a university museum and adapting to this process, this project is a huge achievement. However, what I would add, and this is applicable to all other museums and galleries too, using the expression '*vocal range'* is perhaps more desirable than having an institutional voice.

Referring to the bullet points listed above, note that the Ashmolean's vocal range includes being open, questioning, engaging and personal and that, as a University Museum, it will encourage debate and alternative voices. So much for the fear that such processes lead to a bland result.

Developing a vocal range might, dare I say it, even be quite a fun thing to do. The approach to writing taken at Nottingham Contemporary springs to mind here. Achieving a flow between the internal and external vocal range is paramount to success; as Alex Farquharson pointed out, the communications role within the organisation is about far more than selling a product to potential customers. Why would we promote and tweet in one way when the writing on the actual walls is written in another? Again, perhaps it is time to welcome voices from Marketing and Communications into the interpretative processes too.

Alongside this notion of fluidity and a more holistic approach to voices within the museum, sits the spirit of experimentation. This is typified in the case studies by the British Museum and its use of Gallery 3 as a greenhouse for interpretative experiments. If resources are getting in the way of re-

interpreting an entire permanent collection, perhaps more museums and galleries could identify a gallery or temporary display area where a commitment is made to trying out new approaches to interpretation. We owe it to our various audiences to embark upon such interpretative adventures.

In society, we have moved far beyond thinking about the general public or general audiences. We must acknowledge this in our working practice. What is the point in having a communications team who conduct audience surveys, understand audience segmentation and development techniques if the communication mode once the visitor is through the door is a remnant from a past age? There is a mismatch between the rate at which what we think we know about our audiences is developing in relation to what is being written about our collections. More holistic attempts to reap the benefits of audience research are required.

Pooling these resources; collection specific expertise, visitor specific expertise and learning specific expertise, could enrich the timbre of an organisation's conversational voice. We need to focus more on developing the conversational voice that we might want or like to have and that runs throughout the experience; not just the writing on the wall next to the painting but also the writing at the entrance and exit, signage throughout, floor plans, brochures, flyers, trails, posters. These are shared responsibilities and should not rest to one person to decide. Yes, someone has to lead such processes yet they need to be able to place a lot of trust in others to ensure that the tone of our collective conversation is right. An internal reassessment of the organisation's vocal range could, in a genuinely exciting way, encourage a redistribution of the power base at work within.

From a narrow power base to equality of contribution

When experts (critics and peers) assess the interpretation of others, there is a tendency to focus on what they perceive as labels they would not themselves write. The process that the organisation went through to arrive at what is, after all, their own unique interpretation is thus dismissed as being one that 'we would not want to go down that route here'. Actually, of course you wouldn't. Something is essentially being lost in translation by taking this stance.

I am not advocating a formula. No organisation should copy what another has done; finding what is right for you and your own unique stakeholders (internal and external) is critical. The often heard excuses about banality (largely un-proven almost comedically so judging by the number of newspaper columns provoked by labels) and time and money (dissenters take note of Wolverhampton) mask, I think, a deeper issue: the power trap. Power and control are perceived to be under threat by the implementation of such processes and being open to other influences and voices is decried as leading to a slump in quality of information.

Perhaps part of the resistance resides in not liking being told what to do, particularly if one has spent years researching and studying a specific subject. Subject specialists (who pride themselves on knowing their content) can be very unforgiving towards process, or having a process imposed

upon them. When critiquing the interpretation methodologies of others, process is dismissed in favour of concentrating on the content (which is derided and blamed on a flawed process that few have taken the trouble to fully comprehend). I shall discuss this further in the last section of this paper.

This resistance is matched with a stubborn refusal to comprehend what is meant by advice about reading ages, length of words and numbers of syllables. Contrary to some of the widely held beliefs, not all educators wish to impose bans on words of more than three syllables. A few years ago a colleague and I conducted a survey, with the help of a cross section of children and adults, where it was found that one syllable (and commonplace) words led to the most confusion when not used in a clear context. Why would it be inappropriate to use longer words that may be unfamiliar to a child (or an adult for that matter) particularly if the context helps them appreciate it as a new word or explain its meaning? Similarly, there appears to be a wide misunderstanding that a reading age is not the same thing as a physical age.

Often the brightest academic (or critic) can say the silliest, most un-informed things about labels, simply because they refuse to believe that anyone could possibly be better qualified than they are to write anything about the collection that they are in charge of. It is also possible that this confusion is caused by nobody taking the trouble to fully explain what may be completely alien constructs, however those who shout loudest, or exist within the power base of the organisation usually win.

Power struggles are getting in the way of true creativity and are often justified by the false belief that keeping others out of the process preserves a standard of excellence:

> There is no reason why ‘excellence’ should imply a backward-looking culture and, equally, there is no reason why ‘excellence’ should be conflated with exclusivity. But, conversely, we should be aware that appeals to ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’ can be used as a cover for maintaining social superiority. As John Seabrook, the author of Nobrow, has observed, in the cultural field, sometimes people are ‘pretending to maintain standards but really just preserving status’; we must beware of ‘taste as power pretending to be common sense’. (Holden 2008: 14)

This preservation of status is a critical issue and sits alongside a fear of being made redundant or that any new way of doing something is an attack. I am aware that the previous two pages of this paper read as an attack on subject specialists; within the context of this paper this is intended as a provocation. Thankfully, I have worked with many subject specialists who do not fulfill all of the aforementioned criteria however there are many out there who do. What we must get better at articulating is that no attack on subject specialists is intended; it could be better construed as traction against departmentalisation. We collectively need to get better at being in the spaces

between where our chosen career paths have deposited us or as Julia Middleton would put it, moving out of our own circles of authority. Moving the power around a bit would quite naturally lead to a more open and transparent approach.

Opening up the process

The sensitivity around proceeding with an open and transparent approach to interpretation are exemplified by Glasgow Museums. The critical response to the newly re-opened Kelvingrove in 2006 was particularly negative with regard to the art displays. The collections, presented in thematic displays that went against taxonomy and conventional systems of declarative labelling, were critiqued in a variety of ways:

> The work of interpretation manages to be both minimal and intrusive, diminishing context to facile illustration and reducing intellectual access to the same unvariegated voice...O'Neill has subverted the remnants of an older Victorian taxonomy, only to replace it with another, far lesser form - that shaped by the sensational and flattened rhetoric of mass mediation. This is the governing logic of the new Kelvingrove, one that negates the roles of curators and educators as mediators of a common culture...' (Dawber 2006)

> Kelvingrove 'wallows in a sub-New Labour 'focus-group' mentality' (Patrizio 2007)

And, striking a more positive note:

> While notes are everywhere, they are questioning and mostly unobtrusive, rather than didactic (Mottram 2006)

From accusations of dumbing down to the Burlington Magazine's assertion that the new displays were actually putting the artworks in danger, opinions were divided about the new layout and accompanying interpretation. An important point to keep in mind is that the audience focus of the process followed by Glasgow Museums was widely known.

The use of 'stories' (Kelvingrove and Riverside displays are presented as stories; themes developed by curators after a process of audience consultation - the audience chose from potential themes initially put forward by curators) has attracted some criticism. This break with tradition, from taxonomy to story, may be the root of the critique of this approach. David Anderson comments in 'The Listening Museum' that

> Yet in museums, as in society, it is so often analysis rather than the story that is valued. As Karl Kroeker points out, professionals can have a disguised contempt for narratives, as if they are for simpler minds, whereas analysis - so often the knowledge privileged by experts - is given status. Yet, genuine storytelling evokes judgmental responses, is ethically provocative, is inherently anti-authoritarian, leaves space for multiple responses and interpretations, preserves ideas, beliefs and connections, and is a counter to the accelerating rationalisation and technologisation. Storytelling is easily remembered, and more likely to influence people's lives. As Kroeker says 'storytelling may be the best use to which we can put any language'. (Anderson 2009)

Two issues compete for attention here. Firstly, the openness with which staff at Glasgow Museums engaged in this process; it was clear from the start that this would be an audience focussed project. Secondly, the bold decision to break with tradition with regard to the underlying principle of arrangement. The organisation has been criticised for both. But by whom? The new displays (not so new now although worth noting that they have stood the test of time well thus far) have been predictably denounced by those one would expect to do so; the art press and museum peers are the most vocal critics and perhaps, in time, that will be seen to be a good thing. It is also the case that many in the museum world criticise without visiting. Opinion is formed based upon judgment passed in the art press or the received wisdom gleaned from what is heard on the professional grapevine. The critique of a new way of approaching the interpretation came from those who represent a power base of sorts, or who present themselves as defenders of the art. Holden articulates this well when he writes:

> What is at work here is the belief that only a small minority can appreciate art, and that art of quality needs to be defended from the mob. If the mob gets its hands on the art, the art will be destroyed. Therefore art must be kept as the preserve of the few, because only the few understand and value it. (Holden 2008:15)

Holden's comment could easily be augmented by stating that art can only be written about by the few because only they understand and value it enough to be sanctioned to write about it. This view is misaligned with the idea proposed earlier in this paper that we have to know about more than the art in order to get the label right.

Again, some of the key constraints around interpretation spring to mind. Ever decreasing resources, the amount of time it takes to consult colleagues and fear of design by committee are frequently cited barriers. What is stopping us from conducting simple stakeholder exercises? Subject specialists are key stakeholders but not the only ones; their expertise and contribution is vital and should form the spine, as it were, or the background information upon which the content is based. Identifying the existing personnel from across the organisation who could bring a range

of other expertise to the table (and the label) should not take long and, if well led, should avoid the pitfalls of anodyne committee speak.

So, how can we make sure that our collaborative endeavours result in a truly creative enterprise and avoid design by committee? This question was constantly on my mind after visiting the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum and having the opportunity to glean the views of an Educator, Curator and the Director about the interpretative process that was a vital part of the redevelopment of the Alloway heritage site. Nat Edwards, the Director, was clear in his acknowledgement that collaborative projects can go either way; if not led creatively, the process can easily result in design by committee.

Where a project is based around the work of a small team of people whose contributions are facilitated by a central co-ordinator (as it was at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum), it appears to be not only possible to avoid an end product that will carry a bland institutional voice but also to transcend perceived power bases in an open ended way. Common ground among all the organisations featured as case studies has arisen around the sense that all of them felt it was extremely important to assert *a* voice but that this voice not be bland, that it be informed by the personalities within the organisation and that there be a sense of unification, not uniformity. Almost all case studies revealed a capacity to accommodate individual characters, with one (Walsall) positively celebrating the personal in its approach to interpretation.

Although very different examples operating within different financial criteria, there are similarities of approach that point to shared mind-sets or beliefs. The most successful are those that have invested in the processes by which they have been enabled to evolve their interpretative approaches.

What does it take to lead an interpretative process that successfully integrates many different forms of expertise?

A particular form of leadership is required in order to encourage an organisation to develop its vocal range whilst simultaneously bringing the scales of knowledge and expertise across the organisation into balance in an open and transparent fashion. What traits does this sort of leader require and what tools must they use?

Museums and Galleries are content driven institutions. Planning a temporary exhibition, new display, new public event or new school session all involve working out what the content of all these ‘new’ things will be. Content, and not process can quickly become the focus. However, this focus on content and neglect or disregard for process can be detrimental for all those involved.

Ensuring processes feature open and transparent characteristics means that someone needs to be in the driving seat, steering all the stakeholders in the right direction. And that someone must possess the ability to see the whole picture.

Seeing the whole picture has rapidly become increasingly hard to do. A concise account of the rapid diversification and expansion of skills into departments which have left us unable to see the whole is given in Graham Leicester's 'Rising to the Occasion: Cultural Leadership in Powerful Times' written for Missions Models Money in 2007. In appendix one, Leicester documents the development of the Arts Council and the need on the part of many organisations funded by the Arts Council to replicate its structure. The appendix finishes by stating:

> Inevitably with the growth of new professional disciplines and qualifications it became more difficult for any individual to master the whole range of specialist competencies on offer. Specialisation and fragmentation, the universal story of the late 20th century, set in. We can see it in the evolving structure of the Arts Council itself... Arts organisations in the sector had to follow suit, matching the rococo structures of the Arts Council in order to interact with it effectively.
> From this perspective the 'crisis of leadership' is no more than a crisis of comprehension. With so many different roles to perform, the smaller arts organisations must have multi-skilled, fast-learning, hard-working personnel able to turn their hand to anything. The larger organisations employ specialists, but still need someone with the capacity to integrate the parts into a coherent whole. This then appears to be the critical role of 'cultural leadership' as it is mostly discussed and written about today – putting Humpty back together again. (Leicester 2007: 25)

A Crisis of Comprehension

So, how can we ensure effective project management of a collaborative approach to text writing and sharing of information? As has been demonstrated in several of the case studies, a co-ordinator has been key to the success of a project. However, that co-ordinator need not be the most senior personnel and this is crucial to note here. Also, that co-ordinator need not be the subject specialist and, indeed, it may be best if they are not. (Let us not rule out subject specialists as leaders of these processes altogether though.) What they must be able to do is take a step back, and oversee the smooth running of the whole process.

A successful leader of a collaborative approach to text and labels will be required to maintain a balance between content provision and process and, arguably, should not be providing content at all. In order to see the whole picture (in the case of label writing, this would mean hammering out the co-ordination of all the stakeholders, overseeing the representation of different forms of expertise, timekeeping, keeping the side sequences to a minimum, presiding over disputes) it is perhaps essential that this person not be contributing content.

In this respect, the role of facilitator becomes as important as that of subject specialist; the expertise of an experienced facilitator would be vital to the success of a collaborative text process. (Here, the term facilitator means someone who is able to interact or make progress easier; it is a distinctly different role than that of content provider.) A gifted facilitator-leader will question the subject specialist and tease out as much of their expertise as possible, demonstrating the common ground shared with the other forms of expertise in the organisation and creating a zone for others to exchange knowledge within. (In some ways, the process sometimes used at the British Museum comes quite close to this.)

In facilitating an exchange of knowledge and expertise across boundaries, there must be a shared sense of value between art and audience. Understanding that knowledge of the art or object is only part of the essential ingredients for a label needs to be a constant presence in the process. A facilitative leadership style might also work really well to gain an equality of status between different types of research essential to such internal collaborations.

A recurring theme of this paper has been the need to find a middle ground, where departments can be left momentarily to one side. This middle ground should not be mistaken with a one way path to mediocrity. It symbolically represents a space where there is equilibrium between curators and educators, between content and process and between analysis and story-telling. Such spaces do not always exist in more traditionally structured organisations. Periodically, when new funding streams are made available, a new role may be created as an add-on to a traditional hierarchy (interpretation officer or outreach staff for example). All too often, the roles then quickly become cemented, albeit in a marginalised or peripheral way. What a difference it might make to our working lives if there were counter points of a temporary nature, that we were all invited or sanctioned to move in and out of.

Leading this process needs to ensure the constant examination of the questions posed earlier in this paper:

- How do we define expertise?
- How can we enable those with subject specialist expertise to embrace new forms of expertise and collaborate more effectively?
- How can we encourage colleagues to feel more comfortable about ‘the letting go’?

At Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, the interpretation process involved an interplay between curator, Scots language experts, a writer and the director. All interacted around the co-ordination provided by an Interpretation Manager seconded from the National Trust for Scotland. Regular interpretation meetings were held and any dissent about approach was discussed during these meetings.

Wolverhampton Art Gallery provides another example where no bland “one size fits all” system exists. The approach to interpretation is decided on a bespoke basis; it would be extremely difficult to end a visit there feeling as if the experience had been filtered through an invariant register. It is worth noting (especially for larger organisations with larger budgets) that in the case of Wolverhampton, the current approach was arrived at partly out of necessity; a reduction in public funding imposed restrictions upon the resources available for interpretation (a designated post was cut) however this has not deterred the organisation from continuously examining and enhancing how they create text and how they engage audiences. In some ways, the approach to interpretation here is similar to that of the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum.

These well managed processes are representative of several different forms of expertise interacting; curatorial, linguistic, operational and educational. They come very close to the concept of a trading zone, referenced in the introduction. It is possible that a process modelled on the trading zone concept might just be the best tool for a leader of a collaborative writing based enterprise.

Trading Zones

Peter Galison, of Harvard University’s Department of Physics devised the ‘trading zone’ metaphor and says of it:

> "Two groups can agree on rules of exchange even if they ascribe utterly different significance to the objects being exchanged; they may even disagree on the meaning of the exchange process itself. Nonetheless, the trading partners can hammer out a local coordination, despite vast global differences. In an even more sophisticated way, cultures in interaction frequently establish contact languages, systems of discourse that can vary from the most function-specific jargons, through semi specific pidgins, to full-fledged creoles rich enough to support activities as complex as poetry and metalinguistic reflection"

In some cases, specialists from different disciplines work together to create a shared language (a pidgin or creole) in order to develop shared concepts. In others, ‘trade’ is facilitated across the disciplinary boundaries by someone who is familiar enough with each discipline to act as facilitator.

Different types of expertise are defined as part of the trading zone metaphor. Harry Collins and Robert Evans developed a complex classification of expertise, first published in 2002 and which initially took a threefold formation. The classifications included ‘no expertise’, ‘contributory expertise’ and ‘interactional expertise’. The first of these classifications is self explanatory. The second (contributory) refers to the type of expertise that is required in order to contribute fully to all aspects of a specific domain or discipline. The third (interactional) describes an expertise that centres around knowing enough to be able to facilitate meaningful and productive collaborations

across disciplinary boundaries. (A frequently cited example is that of the social researcher conducting a study into plumbing, who will become increasingly knowledgable about plumbing and be able to talk about it interestingly yet could not install central heating or fit a bathroom [that would require the contributory expertise of a plumber].)

An interactional expert acquires a linguistic ability that can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and information in a way that is pertinent to the subject of this paper.

Getting into the Cultural Trading Zone

Within the walls of the museum lies a vast assortment of different forms of expertise. It seems clear that some forms of expertise are prized more highly than others. The creation of a managed process of exchange/collaboration among colleagues will need to address this implicit hierarchy. It is time to stop the throwing what you know over a wall for someone to tinker with and throw back (I believe this would fit into the non-contributory classification; in other words an elite trading zone environment) that is currently most frequently in use, particularly when it comes to writing labels.

What might a cultural trading zone look like? Many traditionally structured organisations could be revived by the creation of temporary structures that enable colleagues to work in alternative configurations to solve problems or arrive at a shared goal. What does it take to get one going though? I suspect a conventional leadership toolkit might not quite cut it for this task.

Creating the right environment for a cultural trading zone will require a facilitative style of leadership; almost the complete antithesis of a heroic leader. It may well be the case that this leader can have either contributory or interactional expertise. However, a person leading such a process will need to know when to withhold their own contributions and concentrate upon the equal distribution of the contributions of others. Leading the process will require possessing the ability to step back from the content, see the whole picture and occasionally step in to grease the wheels of communication or tighten the bolts of the process.

A trading zone mentality celebrates difference rather than considering it an obstacle. Leading groups of disparate personalities requires a heightened awareness of the needs of the individuals within the group. High levels of emotional intelligence are another essential trait for this facilitative style of leadership. Such an individual may be in possession of contributory or interactional expertise; if known for the former it does not mean that they are lacking the interactional expertise that is required to co-ordinate; it may just be the case that they do not ordinarily get the opportunity to flex the interactional muscle.

They will ensure there is equality of communication and should encourage informality and creativity. (On a light note here, it is an often observed feature of scientific trading zones that members meet informally and may even socialise together. Several of the informants for this

research paper described, anecdotally, that real friendships evolved over the course of their interpretative processes.)

Museums and Galleries could greatly benefit from raising the status of interactional expertise. A debate, or at the least a conversation, about how we choose to define expertise is overdue. Our future success as organisations fit for purpose in the 21st century might very well depend upon it. Continuing to operate in silos whilst attempting to work collaboratively will never really enable us to progress or change and often make it difficult to see where the convergences in our ideas really are.

This throws up big questions (too big for the scope of this paper) about whether the right kind of people occupy the top jobs in Museums and Galleries. Whilst it is worth acknowledging that the sector is wonderfully varied in terms of Leadership, there are strong trends towards recruiting Scholar Directors, whose contributory expertise may be of the highest calibre but whose interactional expertise may be wanting. Of course, the Directors may not necessarily be the leaders of the interpretative process but their support and buy in will be necessary if the collaborative endeavours are to flourish.

Conclusion and negotiated dreams

I asked some of those interviewed as part of this research if they thought a collaborative approach to text writing that took the following form was viable:

> Imagine small teams sitting down to write together - so that the text, at its point of origin, does not have a sole author. Colleagues sit together in front of an object or painting and construct the text. This will be a clean and simple process and will sidestep the linear trajectory currently in use. All thoughts, amendments and dissonance would be hammered out at the point of origin. It may even be possible to get one room done in an afternoon...

This was met by a long silence with one interviewee who then tentatively said '...nice theory Gill...' Another pointed out that 'writing is a craft' and that you 'can't write in groups'. This resistance to sharing the sentence structure is understandable although I still maintain it is worth trying (and I found that although I was challenged, those who have already been through an interpretative process indicated that they would not be against giving it a go despite feeling unsure it would be feasible.

There are particular feelings about writing, as Deborah Robinson highlighted when commenting about the inherent authority residing in black and white print. Another interviewee commented that there are often huge differences between a curator talking and a curator writing, as the written word is more retrievable, quotable, open to critique in relation to analytical facts. However, a beautifully expressed counterargument was put forward by Alex Farquharson who ruminated 'perhaps it is time to minimise the truth claims...'

Perhaps our collective fears of risk taking and experimentation with labels are about nothing more than fear of a bad review. Writing is seen by many as a deeply personal act and, by its nature, a solitary activity. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining the critical response to new exhibitions or entire collections that have been known to have followed an interpretative plan.

The recollection of the earlier cited example from the publishing industry is worth keeping in mind here; subject specialist knowledge is respected and required. It forms a key part of the publishing process. Yet, the dictionary definition of a word, does not originate with the specialist and neither do they have the final seal of approval.

Similarly, in the latter part of the 20th century, the R&D arm of major technology companies (for example Bell Labs) employed expert writers to modify or rewrite the research conducted by scientists at the top of their field (including Nobel Prize winners). Recognising that the primary expertise of their in-house technology experts did not always lie in producing digestible prose, the

intellectual credentials of the company were circulated having been involved in a tight editorial process.

Whilst being at the top of a chosen field in the academic discipline that has been the passion of your life, you may not be in the best position to communicate about it to others who know less than you do or do not share your passion. Of course it is also possible for a subject specialist to do so with ease (I know plenty who can). But, to never explore the spaces that exist between contributory and interactional expertise seems potentially damaging to future success and knowledge exchange. Developments in technology and the ever increasing variety of choice out there in the wider world could mean that, in the future, the most prized form of expertise will be that of the interactional expert and not the contributory one.

Perhaps those of us who are not subject specialists should be more explicit about expressing our respect for those who are. In return, it is only fair that respect will be afforded to the other areas of the organisation that are rich in expertise too. Knowledge and power are inextricably linked and a shift in the power base of many museums and galleries is essential if knowledge and expertise are to be more equally acknowledged and respected.

An Educator is not a jack of all trades, master of none and those who work in this profession need to stop referring to themselves as such. Subject specialists are not a higher order of being and should not be deferred to as such. Those who have chosen careers in Education, Marketing and Visitor Services have in many cases evolved high levels of interactional expertise that complement the contributory expertise of the collections staff. Neither is better or worse and both are essential for the future. As Falk and Sheppard remarked, most people work in Museums because they believe in the work, because something in Museums moves them. With that in mind, we should collectively put more effort into sharing our excitement with one another; as one participant in The *C* Word conference session put it, negotiating our dreams together.

Museums are not books but they are places to tell stories and the people best placed to tell those stories come from all walks of organisational life. There is never going to be a right way or right thing to write on a label. Museums and Galleries must strip this debate back a layer and think about who it is that does the writing before they can ever really hope to give form to the full vocal range that could be informing the writing on the wall.

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