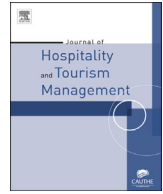




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Enhancing the visitor experience: Reconceptualising the tour guide's communicative role



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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews and synthesises research findings to date on (1) the role of the tour guide as experience broker, (2) the relevance and efficacy of guide communication, and in particular the application of nature and heritage interpretation principles to enhance the guided tour experience, and (3) visitor demands and expectations of a tour guide's communication. These collectively provide a basis for deepening and reconceptualising the communicative role of the guide beyond a one-way commentator to that of an experience broker. With this as a foundation, the authors report on how the content of one tour guide training program, the Tonga Whale Guide Training Program (TWGTP), was selected, developed and delivered in a specific developing country context. Based on pre-post differences reported by training participants, the training was successful in impacting the guides' self-reported capacity to broker physical access, encounters, understanding and empathy of their tour groups. The training also improved guides' understanding of and capacity to apply the principles of interpretation to their tours. Perhaps most importantly, participants shifted the importance they placed on enhancing the tourist experience and their capacity to do so. This case study demonstrates that, when informed by theory and research, training can successfully equip guides to engage visitors, impact their understanding and empathy, and enrich their experience.

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1. Introduction

This paper draws on research about tour guides' use of mediation and interpretation, together with tourists' expectations of their guides, to reconceptualise the communicative role of the tour guide as a vehicle for brokering and thereby enhancing the visitor experience. *Mediation* in the context of a guided tourist experience may be defined as any active attempt to act as a go-between to help tourists construct or make sense of their experience (Jennings & Weiler, 2006). It is often used interchangeably with the word broker. *Interpretation*, a term that has been a bit slower to find its way into the tourism literature, is defined as engagement with tourists/visitors in ways that provoke them to think about and connect with natural and cultural heritage, including places, sites, people, artefacts, and natural and historical events, and that foster a sense of care and stewardship among tourists/visitors (Weiler & Black, 2014). While the importance of tour guides and their capacity to be effective mediators and interpreters have been mooted in

numerous papers (Ap & Wong, 2001; Bowie & Chang, 2005; Holloway, 1981; Huang, Hsu, & Chan, 2010; Mak, Wong, & Chang, 2011), the pathways and strategies through which a tour guide effectively engages with visitors to enhance visitor experiences are poorly understood. Moreover, the demands and expectations of twenty-first century visitors have grown and evolved, adding to the breadth and depth of what tour guides need to know and be able to do, and in turn adding to what needs to be incorporated into tour guide training. In the meantime, many guide training programs continue to rely on past experience, intuition and casual observations by trainers rather than assessing training needs based on theory and research findings regarding what constitutes successful and effective guide communication and experience brokering (Black, Ham, & Weiler, 2001). As a result, too often guide training, particularly in developing countries, continues to be focused on hard skills such as vehicle and boat operation, map-reading, first aid, group safety and outdoor recreation competencies (Weiler & Black, 2014) and on language training and technical public speaking skills such as voice projection, diction and eye contact, at the expense of delivering the knowledge and skills required to fully and competently communicate with and engage visitors.

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This paper begins with a review and synthesis of research findings to date on (1) the role of the tour guide as experience broker, (2) the relevance and efficacy of guide communication, and in particular the application of nature and heritage interpretation principles to enhance the guided tour experience, and (3) visitor demands and expectations of a tour guide's communication. The aim of this review is to provide a theoretical basis for reconceptualising the communicative role of the guide as an experience broker, which can then inform the identification of the content of tour guide training. A secondary aim is to illustrate the application of these findings to the development of selected elements of one tour guide training program, the Tonga Whale Guide Training Program, developed for and delivered in a specific developing country context.

2. Literature and significance

Prior to reviewing relevant research on the guide as experience broker and communicator, it is useful to set this paper in the broader context of the tour guiding and guide training literature. At a macro level, there is considerable support by researchers and scholars for the multiple roles played by guides and their various accountabilities to a wide range of stakeholders (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001; Black & Weiler, 2005; Weiler & Davis, 1993). In recent years, attention has turned to the guide's roles in relation to sustainability outcomes, including improving levels of understanding and valuing of sites, communities, cultures and environments, influencing and monitoring on-site visitor behaviour, and fostering pro-conservation attitudes and behaviours (Ballantyne, Packer, & Hughes, 2009; Hu & Wall, 2012; Weiler & Kim, 2011). In their recent review of some fifty years of tour guiding research and scholarship, Weiler and Black (2014) conclude that there has been a shift away from guides playing a largely instrumental role (e.g. managing tour logistics) to playing multiple roles relating to destinations, sustainability, mediation and experience. Nonetheless, the communicative aspects of guiding, particularly via interpretation, have been and continue to be highlighted as central to guiding practice and guide training since the first comprehensive tour guiding textbook was written by Pond (1993).

Acknowledging this broader context, the remainder of this paper focuses on the guide as experience broker and particularly the communicative roles that a guide plays to enhance the visitor experience. Three bodies of literature are reviewed for this paper, selected for their potential relevance to the present context: training guides with little or no previous training who are employed in a developing country context, primarily to guide groups of visitors from developed countries. While these bodies of literature sit alongside each other and the intersections between them may seem self-evident to some, there has been very little cross-referencing between them. Thus an important contribution of this paper is to foster cross-fertilisation of the concepts, findings and implications embedded in each, as a basis for re-examining and reconceptualising the communicative role of the guide in relation to enriching the visitor experience and the implications of this for tour guide training.

The first body of literature includes studies focused on *the guide as mediator and experience broker*. Much of the theorising in these studies has developed on the basis of observational studies of guides and guided tours, including participant-observation and in some cases interviews with guides. Researchers contributing to the second body of literature, *interpretation principles and practice*, have drawn on a wide range of study contexts and methods but mainly in a non-commercial context such as national parks and heritage sites. This literature focuses largely on non-personal, unguided media such as signs, exhibits, audio-visual presentations, computer-based communication, and static and interactive media used in visitor centres rather

than on tour guides and guiding. Nonetheless, a number of interpretation studies have included face-to-face communication with visitors, and a few of these have collected quantitative and qualitative data in the context of guided tours. The third body of literature, research on *visitors' expectations of tour guides* and their perceptions of the performance of these guides, is underpinned mainly by quantitative surveys of visitors on guided tours.

2.1. The tour guide as mediator/experience-broker

Few would argue that a key role played by tour guides is as an experience broker (Jennings & Weiler, 2006), yet literature on the tour guide as mediator is quite limited. This section of the paper focuses on prior research on the mediatory and experience management sphere of tour guiding.

Within the mediatory sphere of tour guiding, guides can broker visitors' physical access (to places and spaces), visitor encounters (interactions with host communities and environments), visitor understanding (cognitive access) and visitor empathy (affective or emotional access) (McGrath, 2007; Weiler & Yu, 2007). The guide's role as a mediator/broker in each of these four domains can be positive as well as negative; that is, the guide can facilitate but can also limit access, encounters, understanding and empathy (Markwell, 2001). Much of this is done by way of verbal and non-verbal communication with visitors. The following paragraphs report relevant research findings within each of these four mediatory domains to illustrate how guides can use communication to broker and thus enrich the visitor experience. The implications for training are examined in a later section of this paper.

Firstly, Macdonald (2006) and Weiler and Yu (2007) acknowledge the role of guides in *brokering physical access* to places and spaces. They do this not only by physically channelling and manoeuvring visitors to be in the right place at the right time, but also by what Arnould and Price (1993) refer to as communicative staging; that is, by controlling what and how they present and interpret to visitors. In what MacCannell (1976) calls staged authenticity, guides can: focus on the 'front stage'; introduce visitors to real and authentic backstages in response to visitors' desire for authenticity; or construct a pseudo 'backstage' that gives visitors the impression of authenticity. In other words, tour guides can mediate physical access by not only providing opportunities to see and experience elements of the local environment, heritage and culture but also by determining what is not revealed to visitors (Holloway, 1981). Howard et al.'s (2001) study of Indigenous tour guides in one national park in regional Australia found that guides played a role in mediating (limiting) physical access to sites through the use of both verbal communication and role-modelling.

Secondly, both Macdonald (2006) and Weiler and Yu (2007) stress that the guide is a *broker of encounters* or interactions within and between the group and host communities and environments, for example by providing language interpretation and facilitating communication between hosts and visitors. Guides also broker encounters with heritage (Macdonald, 2006) and nature (Markwell, 2001). As with physical access, a guide can also limit visitors' interactions by drawing a group's attention inwards toward the guide rather than outwardly directing it (Cohen, 1985; Holloway, 1981). Tour guides can passively or actively mediate encounters and may act as a role model for appropriate environmental, social and cultural behaviour and interactions (Gurung, Simmons, & Devlin, 1996; Weiler & Yu, 2007).

The third and most researched domain of mediation is the guide as a *broker of understanding* (Macdonald, 2006; Weiler & Yu, 2007) or intellectual access (McGrath, 2007). Tour guides can mediate understanding by using information as a tool for conveying the

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