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Adult Participants' Preferences for Interpretation at a Japanese Nature Park

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Introduction

One of the important issues that interpreters should consider when designing a program is audiences' background, such as demographic characteristics, motivations, interests, needs, and experiences (Gross & Zimmerman, 2002; Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995). Without proper knowledge of the audience, it is difficult to develop programs that will reach them in a meaningful way (Beck & Cable, 1998). When designing programs, it must be remembered that interpretation serves non-captive audiences (Ham, 1992). Non-captive audiences typically participate in free-choice learning, which is self-directed, voluntary, and guided by an individual's needs and interests (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Many of these participants are adults who, in general, are intrinsically motivated to learn (Knowles, 1989) and want to control their education as self-directed learners (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Some adult learning theories suggest that adults need social interaction so that they can see things from different perspectives, construct knowledge, and acquire knowledge (Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Tweedell, 2000). Interactions with group members and mediators are also important for free-choice learners because they create meanings of what they see or experience through their interactions (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

Interpretation that matches the participants' interests connects them to stories

more completely (Brochu & Merriman, 2002). Interpretation that encourages adults to interact with others may stimulate their learning. To accomplish this task, participants' preferences for interpretation and manners of interactions need to be considered. To date, little information has been provided on adult interpretive participants in terms of their needs and preferences. The present study attempted to understand the preferences of adult participants in a Japanese nature park to obtain baseline information that will help design adult-involvement programs.

Study Focus

This descriptive study was guided by two major research questions: (1) How varied are adult participants' preferences in subjects on an interpretive program? and (2) How do adult participants want to interact with group members and interpreters during an interpretive program?

Methods

This study was conducted at Okutama-Kohan Park in Japan. The park was set aside in Tokyo as a prefectural (state) nature park. Approximately 20,000 people visit the park annually. The park is typical among Japanese nature parks in terms of interpretation and offers a range of interpretive programs and services.

Prior to conducting the survey, interviews with 30 adult participants and observations of 10 programs were carried out to assist in developing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was reviewed by two university researchers and by six park interpreters to verify content validity and determine the appropriate vocabulary for the visitor survey. The instrument was also pre-tested with program participants five times, asking them about ambiguity of instructions or wordings. Changes were made according to their feedback. The questionnaire consisted of six rating scale items, eight closed-ended, multiple-choice questions, and some demographic information.

The questionnaire was hand-delivered to adult participants in all interpreter-led programs in the park between September and November 2006. The sampling took place over 10 consecutive weekends and holidays on which the park had high visitation and therefore could offer programs. Every adult participant (18 years and older) in the interpreter-led programs was approached ($n = 559$). Overall, 535 individuals agreed, and 492 completed questionnaires were personally collected by the researcher (92% return rate).

Some limitations exist in this study. Visitors in the park may not be representative of those at other nature parks in Japan. The data reflects visitor responses during the study period and may not represent visitors in the park during other times.

Results

Participants were asked to indicate which type of program they preferred. The largest number of the respondents indicated that they liked viewing the exhibits accompanied by an interpreter (80%). Participating in craft projects with an interpreter was next (43%), followed by interpretive talks (27%), slideshows (25%), guided walks (23%), and visitor center exhibits without an interpreter (22%).

Next, participants were asked about their preferred topics, timing, and length of programs. Nature was the most common topic (90%), followed by stars (65%), culture and history (39%), and lake and dam (33%). The best timing of a guided walk was reported as morning (55%), afternoon (47%), night (46%), early morning (32%), and

midnight (15%). The length of a guided walk that participants were interested in taking was one hour (72%), half-hour (43%), two hours (17%), and half-day (6%).

The preferred way of social interaction was talking to an interpreter during a guided walk (75%) or at the visitor center exhibits (60%). Working on an activity with their group members during a guided walk (63%) or at the visitor center exhibits (48%) was second. While viewing the exhibits alone received a relatively large frequency (47%), listening or watching a guided walk alone received a small frequency (17%). Fewer participants indicated that they liked talking with other group members during a guided walk (19%) or at the visitor center exhibits (11%).

Discussion and Conclusion

Participants indicated that they liked contact with an interpreter, since viewing the exhibits with interpreters received more than three times as many responses as viewing exhibits without interpreters. Talking to an interpreter was a favorable way of interactions. This finding supports other studies that reported the presence of interpreters positively influenced the visitors' program experience (Knapp, 2006; Knapp & Benton, 2005; Morgan, Absher, & Whipple, 2003). The importance of conversing with an interpreter has also been a subject of some debate in the literature (Higham & Carr, 2003; Knapp & Benton, 2004). In free-choice learning settings, a mentor or facilitator can play an important role because people have a strong desire to learn from individuals who have more expertise (Falk & Dierking, 2002). Perhaps a focus on personal interpretation at the visitor center exhibits and informal dialogues with interpreters during a program is warranted.

A greater number of participants liked within-group interactions than intra-group interactions during a guided walk. This finding contradicts other studies that reported a desire for social interactions outside of group members (Brockmeyer, Bowman, & Mullins, 1983; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002). This discrepancy may be explained by cultural differences, as some studies reported that people from different cultures have dissimilar preferences of social interactions (Wallance & Smith, 1997). In a study of British tour guides' perceptions of tourists, Pizam and Sussmann (1995) reported that Japanese tourists mainly kept to themselves and avoided socializing with others. Therefore, attempts to facilitate intra-group interactions might not work well for Japanese audiences.

Although variances existed in audience' preferences, this information should encourage interpreters to design programs to facilitate adult involvement in interpretive programs. It is further recommended that other studies be conducted in Japan to learn more about the backgrounds of visitors to interpretive programs.

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