

Introducing Interpretive Guides

Thorsten Ludwig, 23.12.13

Within HeriQ, mountain and museum guides will be trained in three courses, taking place in Bulgaria, France and Greece, in 2015. This paper emphasises the basic skills which interpretive guides should acquire, according to ParInterp standards and from a didactic point of view.

The general idea of ParInterp is “empowering people by helping them to interpret their natural and cultural heritage [...] provoking them to relate what they experience to their daily lives, in terms of sustainably managing the future” (Ludwig 2012:7). ParInterp therefore connects two value-related concepts:

- heritage interpretation;
- education for sustainable development (ESD).

In terms of heritage interpretation the programme is based on solid ground. Defined by Freeman Tilden (Tilden 2007, first published in 1957), heritage interpretation was developed over decades, especially within the US National Park Service, culminating in the so-called Interpretive Development Program (IDP), which was set up in 1995. Building up on those experiences, a first European training course, called ‘Basic Interpretive Skills’, was planned within the Leonardo project TOPAS (Training of Protected Area Staff) and performed as a pilot course in the Harz National Park in Germany. Two HeriQ partners, Pangea onlus and Bildungswerk interpretation, were involved in TOPAS and resulting from its evaluation, the four basic qualities of the TOPAS course were admitted to the ParInterp programme (Ludwig 2003). In terms of interpretive guiding, the approach has also been adopted into the numerous German training courses for Certified Nature and Landscape Guides (BANU 2012).

In terms of education for sustainable development, work is still in progress. On an international level a ‘Decade Education for Sustainable Development’ was set up by the United Nations in 2002, which is in the responsibility of UNESCO and will be completed by the end of 2014. However, there are already some concrete results for interpretive guiding which were found by the scientific monitoring of ParInterp, and which refer to two different perspectives:

- the ability to detect and evaluate ESD key phenomena within natural and cultural heritage;
- the way of integrating participants in order to support the development of ESD competences.

Within the development of the ParInterp programme, it was found that integrating ESD into heritage interpretation is challenging, but that the interpretive approach provides favourable conditions to put ESD demands into practice (Hermes 2010, Molitor 2012).

Due to the foregoing, the following requirements were set in terms of contemporary interpretive guiding:

- developing attractive themes and storylines from the contents;
- revealing meanings and relationships in an exciting way;
- dealing with expectations and needs of the participants;
- using questioning techniques and visitor formation in a favourable way;
- linking contents to the world of the participants by the use of 'stepping stones';
- providing firsthand experiences and using props in a thoughtful way;
- introducing key phenomena of education for sustainable development;
- integrating incidents and overcoming barriers;
- verifying the self-understanding and the different roles, the guide is taking in the group.

Within the ParcInterp courses, all those demands, which are also part of BANU (2012) by now, are supported by specific exercises, enabling guides to improve their skills in the course group as well as back home. It would be great, if HeriQ can result in new insights and ideas to do so, if it can help guides to raise the awareness for heritage, not only of visitors but also of residents, and if we can apply our findings to national as well as to other international approaches (e.g. IRF 2003, ICOMOS 2008, CEN 2008).

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