

TOUCHSTONE

GREAT EXPLANATIONS FOR PEOPLE AT PLACES

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Interpretation – profession, discipline, art or science?

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I was flattered, but perturbed, when Jorge Morales asked me to write this article for your *Boletín*. Flattered that he remembered something I said ten years ago; perturbed because I couldn't remember saying it! He insisted that I had argued as to whether interpretation was a profession or a discipline. Would I kindly repeat my arguments now? Well, I've had to start again and think very hard! And I've included what we call *red herrings* – false trails I think you call them.

Let me start with *my* definitions of the words in the title:

Interpretation is a communications process that reveals the significance and meaning of natural and cultural heritage in a way that relates to people's own experience, excites their interest and widens their horizons. I often use the short description 'great explanations' which I borrowed from another consultant. (I do not disagree with AIP's own definition of interpretation.)

A profession, in this context, is an intellectual vocation or occupation requiring advanced and tested knowledge, training and experience in a branch of learning or practice.

It can also be an affirmation of belief, in effect a **confession**. This might be, of course, simply an admission of that belief! Is this the first *red herring*? You can swim after it if you wish and have fun. (Jorge and I did!)

A discipline, in this context, is a structured branch of learning or practice that follows rigorous and widely-accepted rules and behaviour. It is often the core of a profession or trade. (It can also be used in a more generic way to apply to any profession, art, craft or science.)

An art, in this context, is a creative pursuit, using intellectual, aesthetic and technical skills. It is often the basis of a profession or craft.

A science, in this context, is a body of proven knowledge which can be either theoretical or practical. It is often the core of a profession or skill.

These are not perfect definitions but I hope they will be helpful as background when you read what I am going on to say.

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Overlaps and confusions

However, there are overlaps and confusions. A profession may also be an art – painters or musicians or writers would affirm that. They might say, in addition, that their profession was also a discipline in that they followed rules, or at least they knew how to break them! A profession may also be a science, clearly, as doctors or engineers would assert. I do not think, though, that an art can also be a science – the principal distinguishing factor being creativity.

Scientists (that is, those practising a branch of knowledge) may well use imaginative as well as logical thinking, but they are not creative in the sense that artists are. (Discuss!) Where an engineer creates a beautiful bridge or a voluptuous piece of machinery (there are some) he or she is being a designer, and therefore involved in a creative discipline. Is all this too much like arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?

The reason I am spending so much time debating this, with myself if with no one else, stems partly from many years of debate over the question *What is interpretation?* Freeman Tilden, the founding father of interpretation as most of us know it, called it an 'educational activity'. Well of course it is, if you take the broad meaning of education which includes teaching, training, instruction and – originally – rearing of children. But interpretation is not 'education' in the narrower sense of teaching at school or college.

Many museums, for example, have wittingly or unwittingly used Tilden's definition to justify the inclusion of interpretation within their educational services¹. But, in my view, and that of many colleagues, interpretation is not education in that sense, because it is not part of a formal, curriculum-based teaching discipline. It is an essentially informal process which takes place when people (including children) are in recreational mode, at leisure, even if they have chosen to 'learn' or 'find out' about the place they are visiting.

That does not mean interpretation ignores any disciplines but it is not a discipline in itself in the narrow way I defined it earlier. On the other hand, in my footnote, I use the word in its generic sense which simply adds to the confusion! Because interpretation depends, for its success, on the way it is conveyed, whether by a person or by some form of visual or aural medium and, importantly, on the way it is received, it is open to infinite variation. That excludes it from being a discipline. Of course, interpretation follows disciplines – not least those set out by the redoubtable Mr Tilden in his six *Principles*. But the practice of these principles, or disciplines, has been adapted, augmented and even improved by individuals and organisations over years of experience and individual endeavour.

The meaning of 'educate' comes from the Latin *educare* which means to rear children, to teach, to bring up – just what we mean today by education. It is,

¹ I was delighted to discover (at an international conference in Athens) that the British Museum, to my surprise, has completely separate departments for interpretation and education. This has clearly stemmed from a rigorous examination of the purposes and practices of each – dare I say in this context? – 'discipline' and, in my view, is a wise and clear-sighted decision which will only benefit staff and visitors.

however, related to *educere*, meaning to lead out. And that is what interpretation does. Rather than 'put in', that is 'teach', interpretation helps to draw out understanding from people in order to widen their awareness, appreciation and, in the view of many interpreters, their respect for wherever they are visiting. To draw out understanding from people involves provoking them to think or consider or even contemplate, and helping them to relate new situations or information to their existing knowledge, experience and awareness.

However, I would say that, like teaching, interpretation is a VOCATION, a calling – in that sense a 'confession', as I referred to above. Like teaching, too, it tends largely to be a natural gift for, or at least an inclination towards, providing guidance, teaching and personal development in others. It is interesting how many interpreters are children of teachers; quite a number have themselves been teachers. The desired outcomes are, essentially, the same.

In this regard, involvement in education or interpretation uses personal qualities (rather than qualifications – they come later) which genetically and / or environmentally have led those who become teachers or interpreters to seek a vocation that satisfies their innate desires to be fulfilled in their work and, at the same time, satisfies the needs and wishes of students or audiences to learn either formally or informally. You've must *want* to be a teacher or an interpreter. You can't do it unless your heart is in it or, if you try, you won't do it well. The rewards are written in the faces of those you help to learn and understand as much as they are in the pay-cheque at the end of the month. Often more so!



Perhaps this is why many people say interpretation needs passion², as well as all its other attributes. It needs a belief in the interpreter that what he or she does is right both in principle and in practice. You need to be passionate in delivering your 'great explanations'. Maybe that goes with the territory of a vocation.

² The interpreter above is a Greek tour leader passionately explaining the heritage of the Island of Rhodes

Art ±skill ±craft

As I said earlier, interpretation cannot be practised as a formal discipline; it must adapt to the social, cultural and educational 'baggage' which each member of an audience brings. Most of us say, repeatedly, that interpretation is done best in person-to-person situations, but good inanimate media can do a lot as well if they provide a range of 'entry points' to suit different people. To do that effectively, in person or by proxy, takes imagination and creativity and so, wait for it, I would argue that interpretation is also an ART. But that raises another question, when we consider art versus craft, which I will return to in a moment.

Clearly, interpretation is also a SKILL, but I haven't defined skill because I think we all know what that term means – being good at something. But this gives me an opportunity to offer you another *red herring*. If interpretation is a skill, could it be a CRAFT rather than an art? My son, an artist, would argue that there is no difference. But in the description I use of myself as an interpretive writer, I say I am a wordsmith, someone whose craft is working with words, in the way that a dry-stone mason skilfully builds a wall of stones – to meet the specific needs of the customer. The style of the wall may be personal to the mason (and approved by the customer) but its location, route, dimensions and other functional qualities are determined wholly by the customer's needs.

Do artists meet the needs of their customers or do they meet, primarily, their own creative needs and then hope existing or potential customers like what they have done? If the latter is the case, which I generally believe it is, then can an interpreter be an artist? That is, can interpretation be an art that first and foremost satisfies the interpreter, when its foremost function is to meet the needs of the audience? But do craftspeople not also use imagination and creativity? Are craftspeople also artists?

You can argue around this for ages. I will stick with saying that interpretation is an ART, in that it uses creativity and imagination, but this art is adapted to be a CRAFT that satisfies those to whom it is directed. I told you it was a *red herring*.

At this point, let me get rid of one of the suggestions in the title. I do not believe interpretation is a SCIENCE. Certainly it follows disciplines and depends upon knowledge (Latin *scientia*), but I contend that it is, at its roots, a highly creative activity which means it cannot be a science, at least in my short definition.

Inspiration and intellect

Many have said that even the most creative pursuits are 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration. That 10% has to work very hard because good interpretation depends greatly on inspiration. It depends, first of all, upon the interpreter being inspired to communicate creatively and it depends, thereafter, on the interpreter inspiring his or her audiences to think, contemplate, relate and widen their horizons.

Interpretation also depends on intellect, of course. The father of a much-celebrated young painter told me once that 'She has intellect. You can't paint

without intellect.' Equally, you can't be a good interpreter without intellect. You don't need to have a formal education, a degree or other qualifications, but you do need an intellect, honed by training and experience to provide 'great explanations'. And you need acknowledgement by your peers of your ability and success. You must be acceptable to your fellow interpreters and be a competent member of the vocation, not only professing your skills but knowing that they meet with the approval of other practitioners.

That's one very good reason why I believe interpretation is a profession. It is the practice of an acknowledged accomplishment, using the creativity of an art and some of the rules of a discipline, and certainly the benefits of knowledge, that is, science. But above all it is, in my definition, a PROFESSION, *an intellectual vocation or occupation requiring advanced and tested knowledge, training and experience in a branch of learning or practice*. For most if not all of us, it is also, of course, an affirmation of belief. It is, in effect a *confession of faith*, in the value and benefits of interpretation as a means of explaining the significance of our heritage and, as Tilden would add, the need for its conservation.

Now let the arguments begin!

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Biographical note

Michael Hamish Glen was introduced to interpretation by Don Aldridge, the UK's 'guru' of interpretation, in 1969. He has worked for a number of government agencies and in 1986 formed Touchstone as an interpretive planning consultancy. He recently established QuiteWrite to provide creative verse and prose. He has written and taught widely on interpretive matters and values greatly the professional and social benefits of international meetings of interpreters. If Michael had a faith, a confession to match his profession, it would be his belief that those fortunate enough to be able to provide 'great explanations' have a responsibility – and a vocation – to help widen the horizons of those who wish to understand the magic and mystery of their surroundings but need a little encouragement and a few signposts along the way.

