

Accessible information

– what to create, and how to do it

Katie Grant offers us a peek into the world of Easy Read and accessible information, with particular reference to the research that was carried out during the Access to Heritage project.

Information designed for people with learning disabilities can take many forms. Some people prefer signs and symbols, for example Widgeits or Makaton – a learning style used to teach communication, language and literacy skills to people with learning disabilities. Another popular format is Easy Read; now classed as a separate accessible information format alongside large print, Braille and audio, it is mainly used by people with learning disabilities, but also older people and those whose first language is not the one being used.

People creating Easy Read do two main things: they make the words simpler, and they use pictures alongside the words. As a writer and production manager of accessible materials, I have been designing and developing Easy Read materials for several years, working across a range of sectors, including health and social care, education and transport.

I find the format fascinating and endlessly rewarding. Reducing complex information into

a series of simple messages, so that people with complex learning disabilities can understand it, is quite a challenge. It may be 'easy to read' from the user's perspective, but it is certainly far from easy to produce something that exudes simplicity without losing meaning and resonance.

One of my first commissions as a consultant was to write and design an 'easier to read' guide for the Imperial War Museum North. It was this experience that heightened my interest in how information and displays are accessed in museums and galleries. How can the experience of a museum, with all its layers of complex information, be effectively accessed and enjoyed by someone with a learning disability? This issue was explored in more detail in the Access to Heritage project in Liverpool.

Access to Heritage

The Access to Heritage project was established in 2004 by Alan Griffiths from Mencap in Liverpool, in response to some ideas developed by Lord Rix



Access to Heritage: forum members discuss symbols to use as identifiers on the sensory trail

and Jonathan Rix at the charity Libertas. Project development took place between 2004 and 2005 with a range of stakeholders, including:

- Liverpool Capital of Culture Company
- Liverpool People First
- The Mersey Partnership
- North West Disability Arts Forum
- Merseytravel
- National Museums Liverpool
- Royal Mencap Society
- Mencap Liverpool and Libertas

A number of people with a learning disability from Merseyside attended steering group meetings, and went on to form the Liverpool Heritage Forum to help explore key issues with their peers. Ticky Lowe, artist and Project Coordinator, was appointed in October 2005 (see panel, opposite). She worked alongside Carolyn Murray, who helped develop the sensory trail at Speke Hall with help from the Forum.

The Access to Heritage Project had three aims:

- to assist and encourage people with a learning disability to access Merseyside's culture and heritage sites
- to enable managers of heritage sites to learn from people with a learning disability, specifically in terms of how to make them accessible to people with a learning disability

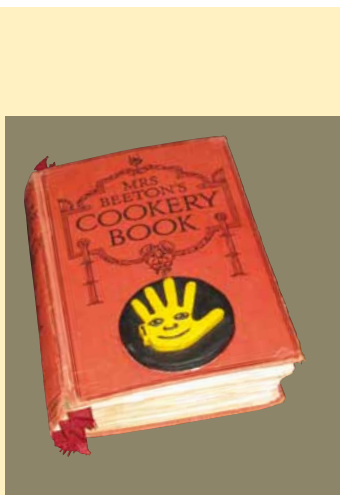
- to create intellectual access guidance that can be used at heritage sites everywhere

A number of sites were visited, including the World Museum, Walker Art Gallery, Merseyside Maritime Museum, two cathedrals, St George's Hall and the Tate Liverpool.

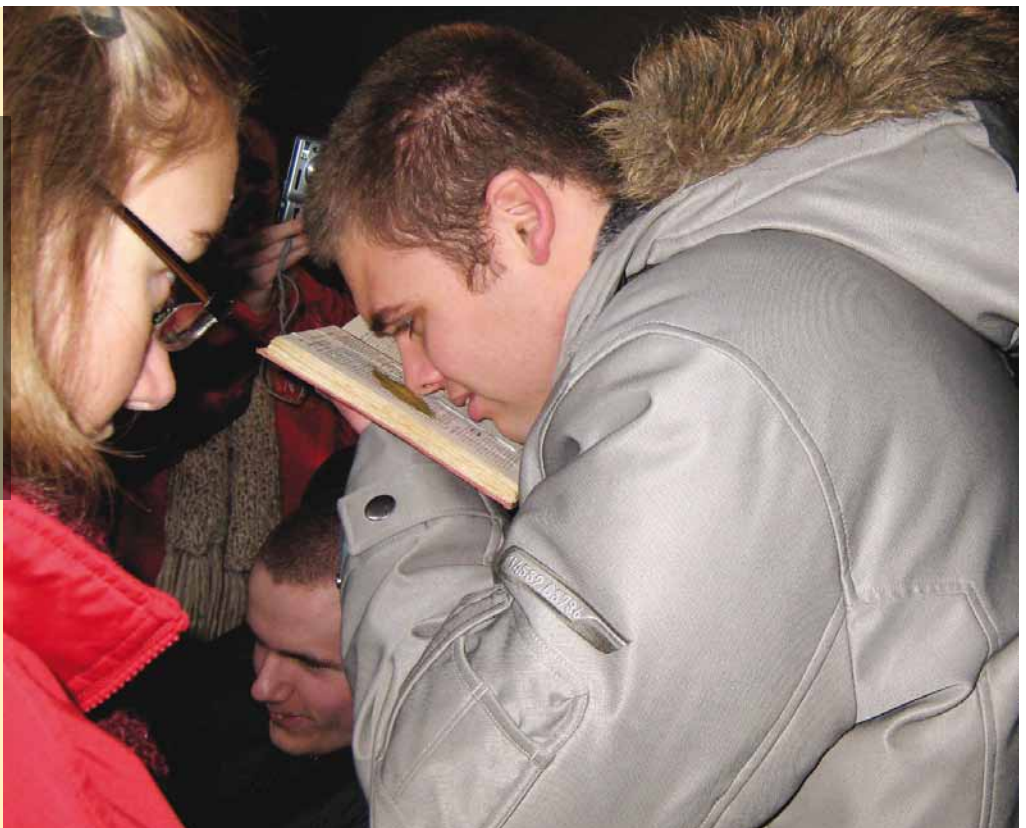
Working in partnership, the project leaders and Forum group members developed a series of workshops and visits to find out what visiting a heritage site involved and how it made them feel. They created a post-tour questionnaire allowing them to record their experiences, explore the ways in which they had used different senses, and to say what they had (or had not) found enjoyable.

Continuing good practice

But what of the future? During the venue visits, the Forum referred to people with a learning disability acting as volunteer workers within the venues themselves. The Royal Mencap Society has worked with The National Trust to develop a project to trial this idea, with Forum members acting as volunteers at Speke Hall. National Museums Liverpool are constructing a new museum in Liverpool called 'Museum of Liverpool Life', which will employ the Forum to carry out the same role as they did at St George's Hall.



This Mrs Beeton piece was created by artist Kate Allen. Daniel, who is smelling the herbs and spices inserted into the book, is a pupil at the Liverpool Royal School for the Blind



Access to Heritage: interview with Ticky Lowe

Ticky is an artist, and was the Project Coordinator for the Access to Heritage initiative. In 1995, she completed a degree in Fine Art Painting at the University of Brighton, and then became involved in costume making and street theatre. Following this, she started making interactive sculpture in the form of furniture and constructed textiles, incorporating light, sound and vibration.

What unique qualities do you think an artist can bring to this kind of initiative?

As an artist and coordinator, my approach to running projects is based on observing the groups I work with to find out from them what works best.

What do you think are the largest barriers facing this audience in society today?

The biggest barrier to inclusion is that not enough people – within both the heritage sector and elsewhere – have experience of being in the company of people with a learning disability. They may feel uncomfortable, and may not fully understand what a learning disability is or how to make things accessible. People with learning disabilities have as much right as anyone else to access museums and galleries, and clearly get a lot out of the experience.

What were the biggest challenges you faced as a project leader, and how did you overcome them?

I work with all kinds of people with learning disabilities. Some of them find it more difficult to communicate – or may only do so on a basic level – and each individual has his or her own needs and personality.

To find out what they thought of places we visited was not straightforward, and I did not want to rely entirely on support staff, who could be influenced by their own opinions. We developed a questionnaire using mostly pictures to find out what senses were used and what could be remembered.

What was the best thing about working on the project?

I think the best thing was being able to make a difference! We have helped to highlight the issues around accessing venues, and have given venues some useful guidance. People are finally starting to listen!

What does accessibility mean to you?

Accessibility in the context of this project starts with the attitude of staff at a venue. Ideally, accessibility will mean that information can be accessed on a range of levels and will include real people as guides, room attendants, and so on.

There should be opportunities to handle objects, fabrics and textures, and to experience smells and sounds. Visiting venues with all of these things helps people to recall the visit even years later.

What do you think the arts and heritage industries need to do more of to include people with learning disabilities?

Make staff aware of learning disability. Look at signage and the use of symbols, and at how these work alongside the text. To include everyone, the symbols used should ideally be the same universally. Providing opportunities to handle collections and have a multi-sensory experience is also important and does not need to be complicated or expensive!

Most importantly, museums and heritage sites should always consult with people with learning disabilities in a meaningful way before updating exhibits.

What is your vision for the future?

I think my vision would be that all heritage venues automatically consult with people with learning disabilities, and that architects and designers are aware of all disabilities when they design anything. For museums and galleries, all the suggestions for improvement in our project will help to include everyone.

Ticky Lowe is currently staging 'Banquet' – a multi-sensory installation put together by artists working in consultation with people with learning disabilities as an example of best practice. It will be in St George's Hall, Liverpool for the whole of September 2009.

Rewarding good practice

by Marcus Weisen,
Manager of the Jodi Awards


There are unsung heroes such as the Museum of London who have worked with thousands of pupils with learning disabilities over the past few years, as they realise the potential of the design implications required by this audience. For example, staff at the Herbert Art Gallery involved some 260 people in formative evaluation as part of the design process to create the Elements Gallery, which opened last year. Nearly four in five had a disability, and two in five had a learning disability.

A particular Worcester museum's visitor leaflet – produced in a few years ago in collaboration with people with learning disabilities – remains a favourite. Comments by people with learning disabilities who had taken part in workshops were used within the leaflet. It exudes a mouth-watering, multi-sensory freshness that I have found in no other publication. Of the City Art Gallery, they used expressions like 'so many interesting rooms', 'nice cakes', and 'lots of light'. When referring to The Commandery, they used words and expressions such as 'narrow', 'musty', 'gunpowder smells', 'diamond-shaped windows', 'soft and rough' and 'absolutely brilliant'. The leaflet came in a pocket-sized folder, with large print and a clear design, all of which made it outstandingly simple and inviting!

There is a great need to design accessibility into every kind of information. Worldwide, very few websites seek to communicate with people with learning disabilities. In an attempt to address this, the Jodi Awards for accessible digital culture launched a new Award last year, entitled 'Excellence for People with a Learning Disability', in association with The Rix Centre. This Award promotes the use of new media specifically designed for the learning disabilities community. Communication with people with learning disabilities is about more than providing information; it can also mean harnessing the potential of digital media to widen opportunities for self-expression. By rewarding good practice, the Jodi Awards help to emphasise the importance of clear communication, which helps users to understand and identify with the subject in hand.

Katie Grant is the Director of Raincharm Communications, an accessible communications and Easy Read consultancy. She is passionate about designing and presenting information in a clear, easy-to-read way, and works with clients across the private, public and third sector.

To find out more about her organisation's work, visit the Raincharm website.

 www.raincharm.co.uk

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Further information

Access to Heritage blog


 <http://accesstoheritageproject.blogspot.com>

Mencap Liverpool have produced some guidance on access to heritage venues. This can be downloaded from the Mencap website, and is also available on CD from Mencap Liverpool.

 <http://tinyurl.com/heritage-sites>

 <http://tinyurl.com/heritage-sites-easy>
(Easy Read version)

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A checklist has been devised by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, which aims to help improve access for disabled people.

 <http://tinyurl.com/access-checklist>

Jodi Awards website

 www.jodiawards.org.uk