

# Education for Sustainable Development as a Chance for the Worldwide Improvement of Interpretation

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## Abstract

The corner stones of an Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) were laid at the UN World Summit in 2002. Since then in many countries of the world people are thinking about how to adjust education in a way that helps to save our common future. Heritage interpretation has excellent attributes to set benchmarks in ESD. For this reason four German partner organizations started to upgrade the EU program TOPAS (Training of Protected Area Staff) that was developed in 2003 to achieve ESD oriented quality standards for interpretation. ESD is a great chance for the worldwide improvement of the traditional characteristics of the profession.

## Keywords

Education for Sustainable Development, ESD, PISA, TOPAS, EUROPARC, interpretive triangle

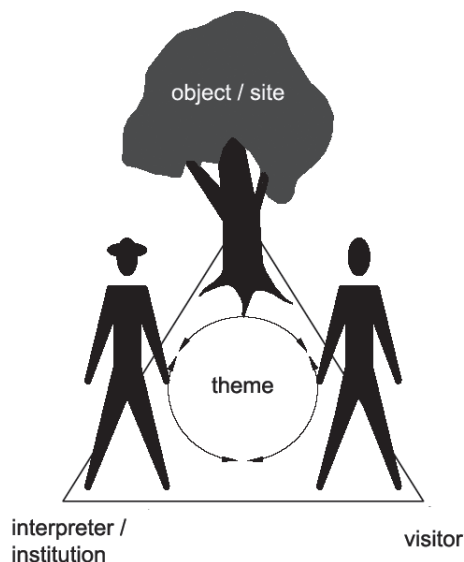
## Interpretation – a Concept on the Move

Heritage interpretation is “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Tilden 1977:8).

This definition by Freeman Tilden highlights the “unique selling proposition” of our profession. Interpretation is providing an immediate contact with the original, focused on a “larger truth”. How relevant is this aspect in comparison to other communication processes?

Since Tilden first published his definition of heritage interpretation more than 50 years ago, time has changed. Today we live in a world, where

- things have to be economically valuable. Even World Heritage Sites at remote places are asked to pay off, their interpretation is often being privatized.
- “high-tech gadgetry” (Beck & Cable 1998) replaces the direct contact with people and places. Many sites, where people go, they have already “seen” before.
- self-actualization and individual flexibility are much more important than the steadiness, the term “heritage” is standing for.



Classical interpretation is under pressure to justify. We all have to ask ourselves questions like: Is our claim to inspire firsthand experiences still up-to-date? Is an intention like the one to prefer costly personal methods in view of the current possibilities of multimedia support still appropriate? And if research shows that Tilden was right and these aspects are playing a vital role on the way to preserve our natural and cultural heritage for future generations: Who else is sharing our point of view, and who will support us?

## **International Initiatives for the Worldwide Development of Education**

Several initiatives have been started to adapt education to a changing world. In the following paragraph, three international examples for the improvement of interpretation are briefly introduced.

### 1. OECD Activities

In 1997 the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was started (OECD 2007). It was carried out by 30 member and 30 partner countries covering almost 90% of the world economy (although e. g. just one African country was involved). Within this project it turned out that success during a life long learning process in an increasingly complex and globalized world characterized by change and interdependence is related to a wide range of competencies that can not be reduced to knowledge and skills.

This finding resulted in the project Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) carried out under the leadership of Switzerland. Following this project and on the presupposition of shared democratic values, of the existence of a market economy, and of the necessity of a sustainable development, a “key competency must:

- contribute to valued outcomes for societies and individuals;
- help individuals meet important demands in a wide variety of contexts; and
- be important not just for specialists but for all individuals” (OECD 2005: 4).

To meet the current challenges, individuals must be able to use a broad variety of physical and socio-cultural tools; and they must be able to act autonomously, responsibly, and reflectively on their own as well as in heterogeneous groups.

The key competencies suggested by the OECD (2005) cover the abilities to

- use language, symbols and text interactively
- use knowledge and information interactively
- use technology interactively
  
- relate well to others
- cooperate
- manage and resolve conflicts
  
- act within the big picture
- form and conduct life plans and personal projects
- assert rights, interests, limits and needs.

The OECD competencies are closely related to the ideas of a free market, which should not be transferred to all social, cultural, or ecological aspects. The market perspective deeply influences the vision of education throughout the partner countries, and this might cause some problems.

But, as we see, most of the competencies are much closer to interpretation than to formal education.

## 2. CBD Activities

For the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication (CEC) developed the so-called CEPA toolkit (Hesselink et al. 2007), which is meant for CBD focal points and those to whom the implementation of National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAP) is delegated.

CEPA (which originally stood for communication, education, and public awareness) has the development of communities in mind. Its first aim is biodiversity conservation, and it is mainly a training resource for communication planning – happening at several sites relevant for interpretation, and containing several points close to the interpretive practice.

## 3. Rioplus

Rioplus is a project of the German Environment and Infrastructure Division (GTZ) in less industrialized countries. One of its five branches of Strategic Communication for Sustainable Development (Oepen 2006) is non-formal and environmental education.

One important aim of education from the perspective of Rioplus is to achieve “environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behavior consistent with sustainable development and for effective participation in decision-making” (Oepen 2006: 31).

Rioplus is more a target-oriented combination of several values and formal and non-formal methods than a completely new program. To describe necessary changes in education, it e. g. follows the Rockefeller Foundation (1999) describing tendencies

- away from people as the objects for change  
and on to people as agents of their own change;
- away from designing, testing and delivering messages  
and on to supporting dialogue and debate on the key issues of concern;
- away from the conveying of information from technical experts  
and on to sensitively placing that information into the dialogue and debate;
- away from a focus on individual behaviours  
and on to social norms, policies, culture and a supporting environment;
- away from persuading people to do something  
and on to negotiating the best way forward in a partnership process;
- away from technical experts in “outside” agencies dominating and guiding the process  
and on to the people most affected by the issues of concern playing

Again it is obvious that several of these aspects can be perfectly put into practice through interpretation.

Beside the initiatives mentioned above e.g. the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) project, the Education for All (EFA) movement, and the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) have close links to the interpretive practice.

Although many aspects of interpretation are playing a significant role within all of these concepts, the term “interpretation” does not occur in most of the programs, and it seems to be sure that the project teams had no idea that something like heritage interpretation does exist at all.

### **Towards an Education for Sustainable Development**

With the publication of *Our Common Future by the World Commission on Environment and Development* in 1987, the term “sustainable development” was set into an international context and defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: 43).

In 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the so-called Agenda 21 was set up as a broad state-ment of goals and potential programs related to sustainable development, to manage the worldwide ecological crisis as well as the crisis in international justice.

In 40 chapters the necessity of achieving cross-sectional decision struc-tures (chapter 8), the important role of non-government organisations in the develop-ment and implementation of appropriate decisions (chapter 27), and the importance of a foresighted education (chapter 36) are emphasized. All mea-sures should be equally responsible to the ecological, economical and social needs of mankind and the environ-ment.

The aim of chapter 36 is the “achievement of environmental and development awareness in all sectors of society on a world wide scale as soon as possible, to strive to achieve the accessibility of environmental and development education, linked to social education, from primary school age through adulthood to all groups of people and to promote integration of environment and development concepts, including demography, in all education programs, in particular the analysis of the causes of major environment and development issues in a local context, drawing on the best available scientific evidence and other appropriate sources of knowledge” (UNEP, 1992)

To reach these aims, in 2002 the UN General Assembly proclaimed the *Decade of Education for Sustainable Development* (DESD) for the period 2005–2014, emphasizing that education is an indispensable element for achieving sustainable development. It also designated UNESCO as the lead agency to promote and implement the DESD (UNESCO 2005).

According to UNESCO (2009), “*Education for Sustainable Development* is about learning to

- respect, value and preserve the achievements of the past;
- appreciate the wonders and the peoples of the Earth;
- live in a world where all people have sufficient food for a healthy and productive life;
- assess, care for and restore the state of our planet;
- create and enjoy a better, safer, more just world;
- be caring citizens who exercise their rights and responsibilities locally, nationally and globally”.

ESD means “recognising and working with culturally specific views of nature, society and the world, rather than ignoring them or destroying them, consciously or inadvertently, in the name of development” (UNESCO 2005: 13).

Since the DESD has started, lots of activities are going on all over the world. New concepts are developed, and in general they seem to be close to the ideas of the DeSeCo program (OECD 2005), which means that thinking in ESD means thinking in key competencies.

## Attempts to Link Interpretation and Education for Sustainable Development

As shown above, heritage interpretation has excellent attributes to set benchmarks in *Education for Sustainable Development*. Some of the key questions for interpretive managers and planners are:

- What can interpretation contribute to the idea of teaching competencies?
- Are there competencies, which have not been taken into focus up to now?

Within a German Ranger project on ESD (Ludwig 2006) e. g. the aspect of sufficiency came up: To learn how to enjoy life with less material goods has not been taken into consideration by the OECD. The same project suggested to vermitteln the Bewusstsein to be part of nature, which seems to be close to the vision of the UNESCO (2009), but again had no relevance to the DeSeCo key competencies. These might be topics, where interpretation could contribute.

Although it seems that the international educational programs did not recognize the possible role of interpretation in ESD so far, some international organizations with a focus on interpretation have already opened for ESD.

The *European Network for Heritage Interpretation* (2009) is taking sustainable development into consideration in its mission statement, which was set up in 2001.

But one of the first comprehensive attempts to combine interpretation and sustainable development on the international field was undertaken by the *International Ranger Federation* (IRF). On an initiative of Denmark, the IRF extended Tilden's principles of interpretation by several aspects concerning ESD. In the end eleven shared principles were discussed, adapted and accepted by the Federation's 4th World Congress in Australia (IRF 2003).

Following these principles interpretation

1. develops an in-depth knowledge of the natural or cultural protected area that is being interpreted and applies that knowledge to build a range of relevant messages/compelling stories;
2. develops an in-depth knowledge of the audience: recognises the perceptions, experience and knowledge of the audience members and develops the interpretive project with respect for a diversity of audiences, including those with cultural, age and gender differences;
3. applies effective communication techniques: develops clear objectives, organises each program or product around a central relevant idea or ideas, plans for all aspects of the project and evaluates the success of the interpretive work;
4. provides the audience members with multiple opportunities to find their own connections between the interpretive messages/interpretive experiences and their daily lives and motivations, thus providing the stimulation to reflect on their lifestyle;
5. recognises that it is inspiration, passion and emotion that often drive action;
6. uses specific local sites, applies practical hands-on and active methods and involves multiple senses; encourages and models sustainable development practices;
7. incorporates sustainability principles throughout interpretive programs/projects and develops with audience members ideas for actions that are practical and realistic locally while considering broader or global impacts;
8. plans all aspects of interpretive events in a way that demonstrate sustainable development principles;
9. uses materials from suppliers who exhibit responsible actions that support sustainable development;
10. strengthens the capacity of people to be involved in the decision making process about lifestyle and development;

11. demonstrates an honest, ethical and clear approach to sustainability.

Also in 2003 the EU program *Training of Protected Area Staff* (TOPAS) was set up to develop quality standards for interpretation in European parks (Bildungswerk interpretation 2003).

In Germany TOPAS initiated an own certification program for interpreters under the roof of EUROPARC Germany, consisting of three 40-hour courses and covering personal interpretation, non-personal interpretation and interpretive planning with two home works and theoretical and practical exams. Recently four partner organizations – EUROPARC Germany, the German Ranger Association, the German Association for Environmental Education and Bildungswerk interpretation - started to upgrade this program by integrating the aspects of ESD with the aim to train all rangers and staff members for information and education in German protected areas on the new standards.

## Conclusion

“Interpretation can be used to assist in almost any management dilemma except budgetary anemia” (Sharpe and Sharpe 1986: 96). The conservation and interpretation of outstanding heritage sites should be a public task. But public funding is increasingly bound to strictly defined quality criteria, and money will only be spent, if interpretive plans meet these standards.

At the UN World Summit in 2002, the corner stones of an *Education for Sustainable Development* (ESD) were laid. Since then, many countries of the world tend to set such standards to improve education on an international level.

The idea of lifelong learning of competencies, as well as the methods discussed in ESD, are very close to the interpretive approach. Therefore interpretation should join this discussion, to get the chance to influence these standards – and to support the objectives of an *Education for Sustainable Development* on a field, were ESD might be particularly successful, and where heritage interpretation is much stronger than all other forms of communication: on the field of the firsthand experience of original objects or sites, primarily under the guidance of experienced interpreters.

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