

Meeting the visitor

Dissemination of mobile guides at the museum front desk

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Museums are eager to share their knowledge and passion about the objects on display. Too much information in the galleries, however, can be a disturbance. Mobile guides are a smart way to offer information that enriches the individual experience without interrupting other visitors. But how do museums encourage visitors to take up the new digital devices? Ditte has scrutinized the interaction between visitor and front desk staff offering a mobile guide. Her research indicates that the biggest challenge of working with digital education lies not necessarily in the production, but in the distribution.

Introduction

Over the years, the benefits of mobile devices in museums have been explored in a number of papers.¹ Yet studies show that encouraging visitors to use mobile interpretation is the largest challenge in implementing mobile projects in museums.² One of the keys to encouraging visitors to use mobile interpretation – one that has received little attention so far – is the distribution and dissemination of the guides.

Based on 18 hours of video recordings at the museum's front desk, this paper addresses the interaction between front desk assistants and visitors about a possible iPod touch loan. The possible loan is treated in an

offering sequence, which typically happens after tickets and money have been exchanged. The offering sequence is a particularly crucial phase where the front desk assistant and the visitor cooperate in matching the museum's offer and the visitor's needs. A closer look at the interactional features of this sequence can contribute to a better understanding of the nature of the service encounter and the challenges in supporting different kinds of visitors around new technologies.

The data for this study was gathered in November 2011 at SMK, the national gallery of Denmark. The museum had recently launched an audio guide application for a temporary exhibition, and visitors could borrow an iPod Touch at the museum's front desk.

Front desk encounters

There are no studies of the distribution and dissemination of visitor audio guides at the front desk of museums known to the author. However, the fundamentally social and interactional basis of the service encounter has been studied outside the museum literature in a wide range of real-life settings. The service encounter can be seen as an instance of face-to-face interaction between a server who is 'officially posted' in some service area and a customer with a desire for some service. In service encounters, there tends to be a particular kind of asymmetry in the relative states of the participants' knowledge.³ Although customers know what they want as an end product, they often lack adequate knowledge about what exactly is involved in achieving that outcome, and what all of their options are. Servers, in contrast, tend to know their institution's official terminology for its services, but not what the customer wants or needs. In order to achieve mutual understanding, the participants must work to manage their relative states of knowledge and arrive at mutual recognition and understanding.

The service interaction

Implementing a digital media loan at the museum's front desk greatly affects the service interaction between the assistant and the visitor. Questions of whether or not to offer the iPod explicitly become relevant: Should it be standard procedure? Should assistants only lend it out when they have the time? Should only certain types of visitors have the offer? And where in the service interaction should the loan be offered?

A great constraint on the service phase is time, and a digital media loan takes time. When time is limited, for example when visitors are queuing, service is limited. When time allows, the front desk assistant may offer a detailed demonstration of how to use the guide and explain the possible benefits, but may completely exclude the offer if lots of visitors are waiting in line. The front desk personnel are also faced with challenges in recipient design. They must be able to quickly 'read' visitors and customise the offer according to each visitor's special needs and competencies. In other words, in the recipient design, issues of visitors' prior knowledge and familiarity with apps and iPods become relevant.

An example⁴

The following excerpt's sequential structure is typical in the sense that the offering sequence occurs at the final part of the interaction between the front desk assistant (A) and the guest (G). The guest arrives at the desk (lines 1-3) and buys a ticket for the temporary exhibition (lines 4-14). After the money, the tickets and the written folders have been exchanged (lines 15-20), the offering of the iPod loan occurs (lines 21-29). [1]

If we look at the form of the offer more closely, the word choice *audio guide* is noticeable (line 21). With the word choice a stance towards the object itself and a stance towards the recipient is articulated. Other formats in the data are: *a guide you can bring into the exhibition, a*

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1  ((G arrives at desk))
2  A:  hej ((in Danish))
3  G:  hi
4  A:  just one please
5  G:  jaer just for the regular (.) collect-
6  A:  just the regular
7  G:  yeah it's free
8  A:  oh it's free
9  G:  yeah the gallery upstairs it's free
10 A:  oh ah I want to see like the Toulouse Lautrec right
11 G:  yeah you can
12 A:  okay thats the one [I want to go to yes
13 G:  [jaer okay (one moment)
14 A:  mhm
15 G:  ninety five
16 A:  (19.0)
17 G:  five
18 A:  thank you
19 G:  you're welcome
20 A:  (1.5)
21 G:  do you like an audio guide
22 Pa: (0.5)
23 G:  uh is (.) is that free as well or
24 A:  it's free you just need to put down a deposit like
25 G:  an id or
26 A:  yeah sure I'd like that please
27 G:  (18.0) ((A leaves to get the ipod and comes back))
28 A:  oh through an ipod
29 G:  yeah
30 A:  (2.0)
31 G:  and this is the guide for Toulouse Lautrec
32 A:  ((begins instructions))
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OPENING

REQUEST-RESPONSE

TRANSACTION

OFFERING OF IPOD LOAN

[1] Transcript of an exchange between museum guest and front desk assistant at SMK.

multimedia guide, a thing you can listen to, a smartphone app, an iPod. With the word choice *audio guide*, the assistant uses a term, which is probably more commonly known compared to for instance 'an app'. The whole offering process is fairly straightforward: *Do you like an audio guide?* (line 21). There are no hesitation, pauses or other markers, compared to other examples in the data, for instance: *then I: e:m also have such things.* The way the offer is produced in the excerpt indicates that the assistant does not regard it as problematic. By using a direct and straightforward question, the assistant displays an expectation of familiarity on the guest's part. In other words, she treats the object as an object known to the visitor.

The visitor does not accept the offer right away; she asks *is it free* (line 23). However, she does not object to the assistant's expectation that she knows what the offered item is. When it is confirmed that it's free, she accepts (line 26). Then an 18 seconds pause, and the assistant turns

around to get the iPod behind the counter, then she comes back and places it on the desk. Next, the visitor says *oh through an iPod* (line 28) thereby displaying that this is not what she expected to get. Thus, there is a difference in understanding: What the assistant meant was not what the visitor thought she meant.

So in this short exchange we see that questions of acceptance are closely connected to questions of familiarity: is the visitor familiar with the item that gets offered, and on what grounds will he or she accept or reject the offer? This multi-layered quality of offers becomes crucial, as participants may choose to align with the terms of familiarity while misaligning with the offer, and vice versa. Moreover, questions of familiarity are sensitive issues. Participants strongly orient to the novelty of the media and the assistant is very likely to put the visitor in an awkward position no matter what she does: If she displays anticipation of familiarity, chances are that the visitor is not familiar. If she displays anticipation of non-familiarity, she might treat the visitor as not competent.

In any case, when offering a digital media loan museums face great challenges in how to make the offer, how to talk about the offered item as well as how to present it as a physical object and explain how to use it – while guessing the visitor’s familiarity based on seconds of interaction.

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- 1 Tallon & Walker, 2008.
 - 2 Pocket-Proof & LearningTimes, 2011 + 2012.
 - 3 Drew & Heritage, 1997.
 - 4 A more elaborate analysis can be found in Laursen, 2013.

References

- P. Drew & J. Heritage, *Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.
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