

INTERFACE EXPLAINER

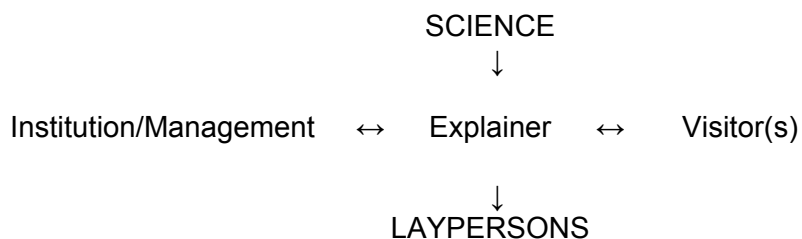
**Protocol of a workshop
organised by the Science Center Netzwerk
Vienna, March, 16th 2009, 13:30-15:30**

with 17 participants from the Austrian Science Center Netzwerk and guests

Key questions:

- Which role(s) do explainer play in regard to Science Center Activities?
- Which communication is necessary?

Explainer as an interface in 2 levels:



Input from:

- Ari Einbinder, Explainer at the New York Hall of Science; internship at Techmania (CZ)
- Karin Garber, Vienna open Lab (A)
- Gerid Hager, Ars Electronica Center (AEC), Linz (A)
- Alexandra Viehhauser, Architekturzentrum Wien (AzW), Vienna (A)

Explainers have different names in different institutions:

“Edutrainer” (Techmania)

“Architekturvermittler” (trans. “architecture mediator”) (AzW)

“Infotrainer” (AEC)

“Tutors” (Vienna open Lab)

Other terms mentioned: animator, facilitator, culture mediator, interpreter.

Special aspects regarding the explainer-philosophy of the different institutions:

New York Hall of Science:

- science background not necessary but helpful.
- focus on asking questions to help visitors communicate with the exhibit, to think.
- teach idea of “making guesses and hypotheses”
- weekly peer-to-peer training sessions, 1 hour, 5-10 people
- science career ladder – possibility to grow. (explainer > senior explainer > program manager)

Techmania:

- volunteer program for highschool students.
- research time for explainers: to work on projects to improve themselves and the institution (e.g. work with the curator, learn English etc.)
- explainers should know what visitors should learn: “punch lines” for exhibits.

Architekturzentrum Wien:

- architecture students as explainers
- jour fixe once a month
- twice a year: trainings with experts from outside the museum.

Vienna Open Lab:

- tutors with molecular biology background
- Contact through a lecture on the university
- trainings through special lectures in the university
- try to “unlearn” the scientific language by dealing with the visitors
- questionnaire for visitors with questions also about the tutors
- guideline book
- lab journal for internal communication among explainers (e.g. if something is damaged)

Ars Electronica Center:

- very diverse infotrainers with different backgrounds (retired people, housewives, students etc.) to cope with the diversity of the visitors
- Role: protect some sculptures, show how to interact and be creative with the exhibits
- Online platform to ease the communication among the 70-80 infotrainers

Working groups:

Participants split up in working groups assuming the three roles institution / explainer / visitor and focusing on the question:

What (communication) is necessary for each group to feel respected by the others?

Institution shows respect for explainer if it ...	Explainer show respect for the institution if they...	Explainer show respect for the visitors if they...	Visitors feel respected if there is...
is open for new ideas	are in time	appreciate their opinions even if these are misguided	a clear visibility of the explainers (e.g. T-Shirts)
gives and shares responsibilities with them	care for their facilities, show care for the museum	do not make them feel as in a shop ("may I help you?")	a reaction to their comments
organises parties, trips, events, regular trainings	give feedback and ideas	clearly answer to their questions	a guestbook or other feedback possibility
the people responsible show up, give their time and feed back and engage in personal contact with explainers		compensate flaws of the exhibits, show tricks	an effective orientation system within the institution
provides an effective orientation system within the institution, so that explainers can focus on the content		meet the expectations of the visitor (expert, play,...etc)	
offers promotion in hierarchy or payment		advertise positive experience	
gives senior explainers first choice in scheduling		let them feel greeted	
offers a career ladder (although problem: narrow top)			

All communication should be such that it establishes a partnership on eye level between institution – explainer – visitor!