Informal Communication for the Future:
The 5 Most Interesting Informal Communication Related Research Articles of 2006

Levi T. Novey

One of the major failings of practitioners and researchers in the field of communication is to regularly share information and findings with one another. This is especially true in locations where communication efforts are informal, such as museums, parks, zoos, and nature centers—places where people generally only have their own interest as motivation to pay attention to the information and messages that are offered. As a person with experience both as a practitioner and researcher in the field of informal communication (a.k.a. interpretation), I want to help build a bridge between the two important groups and promote more interest in research relating to informal communication. Before I share some summaries with you about what I found to be the most interesting research articles published in 2006, I should tell you a little bit more about the methodology I used to determine these “great reads” as well as note some general connections shared by the studies.

To begin my search for the most interesting articles published in 2006, I started by digging through the contents of 28 different peer-reviewed scientific journals relating to communication, and selecting those studies with the most interesting titles and/or abstracts. I ultimately chose about 55 articles to read through in greater detail. Please keep in mind that the five studies described below are those that I simply found to be the most interesting—and they are not necessarily the most “useful” or “best.” I decided that the qualification of “interesting” would be the easiest for me to judge quasi-objectively, with my primary goal being to inspire more interest in research among my peers in Region 10.

If there was one key finding that resonated in my mind about these studies, it was that informal communication needs to be daring, but also calculated, and constantly evaluated so that alterations can be made that maximize our chances for success. So many of the interpretive programs and exhibits we provide as informal communicators are tame and safe, and the studies you will read about here provide evidence that even the most novel, creative, risk-taking, and well-executed approaches do not necessarily ensure that we will have tremendous effects on learning, behaviors, or attitudes as communicators. The good news is that they also suggest that while our effectiveness might be minimal, we are slowly refining our understanding of what works well and under what circumstances. So without further ado, here are the top five articles:

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Can you imagine hiring therapists and counselors to help comfort potentially distraught visitors who have attended one of your exhibitions or interpretive programs? The National Museum of Denmark thought this precautionary step was prudent after they choose to offer a gutsy interactive exhibition experience: a chance for a visitor to enter an hour-long live-action sequence that realistically put them in the role of a refugee fleeing from their home country. Live actors in the exhibition treated visitors as if they were real refugees. The exhibit started with each refugee being brutally harassed by soldiers. The “refugee” then experienced what the escape to another country would be like, only to face the poor treatment they would receive in the country where they sought asylum. To give you a better indication of how powerful and realistic this exhibit was, one participant said that he “was about to **** in my pants.” To better understand how this experience affected visitors’ attitudes toward refugees, a researcher interviewed 12 different people immediately after they exited the exhibit. Most of these same participants were interviewed again 3 to 4 months later to see what elements of the experience still remained memorable in their minds. The degree of empathy participants expressed for refugees seemed to grow tremendously. And while participants were not inclined to show any more interest in learning more about refugees 3-4 months after experience, they did indicate greater awareness of stories in the media about refugees. Strong interest in attending new exhibits at the National Museum was also expressed by numerous participants. This study inspires me to believe that we have everything to gain by challenging ourselves to make truly ambitious, creative, and meaningful communication efforts.


If you have ever wondered what evidence there is that suggests interpretive themes are effective, then you would have shared the curiosity of the authors of this paper. To help fill a void of research about the effectiveness of themes, the researchers conducted a study where they offered two variations of an interpretive program about bats to 8 different classes of third graders. While the content in each version of the bat program was the same, one of the programs was delivered using a repetitious theme, transition statements, and a conclusion, while the other presented the same information but in no organized fashion. Children were pre-tested and post-tested to determine their ability to recognize, recall, and apply knowledge about bats. The findings suggest that the third graders who saw the program with a theme were three times more likely to be able to state the main message of the program and apply knowledge than were the students who saw the unorganized program. Students who saw the disorganized program, however, were still able to correctly answer multiple choice questions about bats, illustrating a significant degree of ability to recognize information that was presented. A major limitation of this study (that is recognized by the researchers), is that a classroom study about themes might not reflect the conditions of, for instance, an interpretive program offered to the public in a park. That being said, this study presents substantial evidence that there is tremendous value in using themes, transition statements, and conclusions when providing an interpretive program.

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Spring Workshop Partnership with IWH a Great Experience!

Everyone attending our March 25 Regional Workshop was treated to a great day of excellent programs, good fellowship and a taste of the international favor of interpretation. It certainly served as a great event to kick off a fantastic week for those of us fortunate enough to stay over for the IWH. It gave great cause for reflection and fond memories.

Our morning opened with an exciting keynote from Sam Ham. Sam set the tone for the day by stirring interpretive passions with exciting concepts featured in his anticipated new edition of Environmental Interpretation. Each participant and presenter built upon Sam’s passion and created an open, sharing environment. We broached new areas and came away with some great ideas. I want to thank all of our presenters for providing such a memorable day. Once again, thank you to Sam Ham, Todd Cullings, Chuck Lennox, Tim Merriman, Ginger Murphy, Lisa McIntosh, Duane Fast and TAA Canada, and Paul Stromdahl for your time and efforts. Special thanks go out to Betsey Ellerbroek and Paula Cline-Jones for their dedication and efforts toward insuring an enjoyable positive experience for all.

52 people attended and helped create our own international atmosphere with participants from Japan, Jamaica, China, Scotland and strong representation from Canada.

All in all, I believe the workshop offered something for everyone. One of our region’s newest members, Karin Vickars of Vancouver B.C., stated she came away from the workshop inspired to learn more and was eager to begin presenting interpretation. Todd Cullings, longtime Mt. St. Helens interpreter and trainer, stated he felt reenergized by the workshop and was honored to have Sam Ham and Tim Merriman attend his sessions.

I believe the workshop captured the heart of what NAI and the profession of interpretation is all about. It is the feeling of sharing a profession and a passion. It does not matter the make up of your national, ethnic or professional culture or your area of expertise. The art of interpretation transcends differences and communicates the beauty and value of our individual cultures and resources. Thank you all for being there and creating a wonderful day!

~Roger Riolo
Be a Region 10 Leader

Would you like to be part of shaping the future of Region 10 of NAI? Now is your chance. It is once again time to start thinking about running for one of our four Regional Officer positions. We will be doing things a little differently this year. Those elected to the Region Director and Secretary positions will serve a two-year term, but the Deputy Director and Treasurer will serve a three-year term for this election only. In the future, there will be an election every year for at least two of the officers. This will prevent all new, inexperienced leadership teams in future. Elections will be held in the fall, with officers beginning their term on January 1, 2008. For a description of duties, visit www.interpnet.com/download/jobdescriptions.pdf.

If you are interested in running for office, please send a brief bio and statement of purpose to Elections Chair, April Rand, at arand@fs.fed.us by May 25, 2007. This will appear in our summer newsletter in the form of a sample ballot. Any questions can also be directed to April.

Area Updates

Alaska:
Southeast Alaska upcoming events:

Juneau Museum Day May 12, 2007, Noon – 5pm:
Juneau’s museums open their doors to the public with summer exhibition openings, family activities and free shuttle service between the sites. Participants include the Alaska State Museum, Juneau-Douglas City Museum, Last Chance Mining Museum and the John Rishel Mineral Information Center. For more information, please call (907) 465-2901.

Little Norway Festival in Petersburg May 17-12, 2007
Petersburg celebrates its Norwegian heritage by honoring Norwegian Independence Day, May 17th. One of our biggest events, the entire community celebrates with food and craft booths downtown, parade, a Scandinavian pageant, costume show and Kaffe Hus, music, and much more! For more information visit www.petersburg.org/visitor/littlenorway.html.

Do you have an upcoming event in your area, or something interesting to share? We’d love to have every part of our region represented in this section, but that can only happen if you help. Please send “Area Update” information to me, or to your area representative, listed on the second to the last page of every issue of Northwest Passages.

The “Raven’s Tale”

This year’s scholarship fundraiser quilt is being created! Faith Duncan is putting her magic to work again with this beautiful 48 inch, black on red design. The pattern book photo to the right only hints at the richness of the finished piece.

Buy your chances early and avoid the rush!
The tickets are $5.00 a piece, or 5 for $20 and can be purchased from:

Betsey Ellerbroek
Columbia River Maritime Museum
1792 Marine Drive
Astoria, OR 97103 USA

Don’t forget to provide your contact information when purchasing tickets.

Do you think that it would be easy or difficult to get people interested in calculus? If you thought “difficult,” then you might be impressed by what some people said after seeing an exhibit about calculus offered by the Science Museum of Minnesota. The author of this article used interviews and observations to better understand how different kinds of visitors used and appreciated an interactive and kinesthetic exhibition about calculus. The most interesting finding (of many) was that this exhibit’s real world application approach resonated with many visitors, and indicated that when it comes to the attitudes people show toward calculus (or “math” as most visitors viewed it), it’s possibly the method of teaching that’s important for obtaining appreciation, not the subject matter itself.


It is not unusual for us to sometimes think that as communicators we “are preaching to the choir.” But what about those times when people initially disagree with the perspective that you want them to walk away with? How easy is it to communicate credible information and get them to see things your way? Not very easy, according to findings reported in this study about how college students processed well-articulated and opposing arguments about the issue of drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The pre-existing attitudes research participants had before being exposed to the treatment in this experiment were similar at post-test, if not even strengthened with the information that was provided in the study. In other words, those people who were respectively for and against drilling for oil believed that their opinions were bolstered by the two sets of opposing arguments presented in the questionnaires they completed. The authors suggest that this result is somewhat discouraging for communicators, as it shows that typical, “educational” communication strategies will not be effective when natural resource managers want to sway peoples’ attitudes toward a desired way of seeing an issue. Instead, the authors recommend that more persuasive and shrewd strategies will be needed to change peoples’ perspectives. For instance, they suggest that by using a technique of “portraying the opposing side as unconcerned about important values” supporters might be gained.


Have you ever eaten an insect? Classes of middle school, high school, and college students received the chance to chow down on tasty critters like crickets and mealworms while participating in this study. It evaluated the effectiveness of a typical kind of environmental education program that is offered by educators to increase appreciation for invertebrates: a “bug banquet.” Participants in these banquets generally listen to a program that is about the ecological importance of invertebrates (think insects) and their value as a food source for humans. Following the program, participants are offered a banquet of food to eat that includes cooked insects (and, yes, eating is voluntary). To determine attitudinal change among experimental and control groups, the researchers administered questionnaires that pre- and post-tested students’ attitudes toward invertebrates and their feelings toward eating them. Interestingly, the results of this study were murky to interpret (like many social science studies). Age appeared to be an important factor in how students’ attitudes were influenced by the bug banquets. College students appeared to show attitudinal changes in the desired direction, whereas

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So that’s it. All of the articles I have discussed are easy to read, and provide more detailed explanation beyond what I have provided here. I hope that this short sampling of studies reflects the importance of research to our field, and the constant need for us to question and investigate how we can communicate more effectively. If you have any questions or need help finding these articles, then please feel free to contact me.

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