

“Evaluate, Assess, Critique-it’s All Good”

Evaluation To Improve Docent Programming

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Introduction

Evaluation is a fundamental and essential tool for ensuring and improving program quality. It involves identifying the important elements of an activity such as a tour or training program, determining if these elements are appropriately addressed during the activity, and communicating the findings in order to reinforce or alter the way the activity is carried out.

A docent’s, or volunteer interpreter’s, work with visitors is a foremost, visible aspect of an interpretive program.

However, all of the elements of an interpretive program can and should be evaluated including training, supervision and coordination, as well as interpreter performance. At the National Zoo, a variety of approaches are in use to evaluate aspects of the volunteer programs managed by Friends of the National Zoo, including staff and visitor evaluations of interpreters, interpreter evaluations of themselves and other interpreters, and interpreter evaluations of staff. This paper reviews these evaluation methods and provides example tools.

Admittedly, evaluation is challenging as well as beneficial. People share an almost universal discomfort with having their performance evaluated and feedback must be provided in a sensitive and positive manner. This paper offers brief discussion of issues associated with each method. For those interested in additional information or insights, please contact the FONZ Department of Education and Volunteer Services staff.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Evaluation Of Interpreter Performance
 - By Self Assessment
 - By Staff Observation
 - By Peer Observation
 - By Tour Group Feedback
2. Evaluation Of Training By Interpreters
3. Evaluation Of Program By Volunteers

Attachment 1: Evaluation Of Interpreter Performance By Self-Assessment

Description: A simple and informal method of self-introspection

Procedure: Interpreters are encouraged to reflect on their performance after every shift. The series of questions are provided to help interpreters think through elements of their job.

Challenges/Payoffs: Most people are comfortable with self-assessment but may not do it regularly. Also, self-assessment does not provide a means of identifying incorrect beliefs or ineffective behaviors (unintentional negative body language). However, with frequent encouragement, self-evaluation can be made a regular habit, and an ethic of self-improvement can lead to voluntary brushing up on content or fact-checking.

Tool:

Self-Assessment Form

Becoming an interpreter is a process, not a goal. During each shift, you’ll discover new techniques. Some will work better with some visitors; others will work best with other visitors.

Some won’t work at all. No interpreter is perfect. However, you can always get better.

To help you refine your skills and talents, it is suggested that you assess your interactions with visitors at the end of each shift and/or at the end of a particularly difficult interaction. Use the questions below to assist you with your self-evaluation. The goal is to have more “yes” answers than “no” answers.

Information -

Were you confident about the accuracy of the information you shared?

Did visitors’ questions reflect understanding regarding what you said and a desire for more information?

Did your questions encourage participation and lead visitors to new discoveries?

Did you summarize or direct visitors to other exhibits of interest before they ended the conversation with you?

Relevance –

Did you have a focus or theme for your interactions based on visitors’ interests, capabilities and level of knowledge?

Were your topics of discussion interesting to visitors?

Did you get visitors to use more than two senses during your interaction with them?

Were visitors you talked with attentive, comfortable, listening and looking at you or your topic of discussion?

Did you guide visitors' attention toward the object of discussion as you spoke?

Did you interpret spontaneously according to visitors’ attention?

Did you add appropriate anecdotes to your factual information to add interest?

Service-

Were you attentive to visitors’ comments, questions, and replies?

Did you treat each visitor like an intelligent person?

Did you treat each visitor equally?

Did your body language indicate you were receptive to visitors? Did you appear available for conversation?

Were you loud enough to be heard by the visitors you were talking with? Did you pronounce your words clearly? Did you avoid competing with other noises?

Did you vary your speaking rate for emphasis and feeling?

Did you share the conversation with other visitors?

Were you positive at all times? Did you express warmth, interest, and enthusiasm? Did you use positive facial expressions, like smiling?

Did you avoid sarcastic or mocking comments?

Did you face visitors while speaking to them? Were you always visible to each visitor, without blocking the view?

Did you let the visitor finish a question or response before you spoke again?

What was your score? If you answered "no" to a question, work on the appropriate skills so that you are able to answer "yes" next time you evaluate your interpretive performance.

Attachment 2: Evaluation Of Interpreter Performance By Staff Observation

Description: Formal, scheduled observations by staff in focused programs where a minimum set of information is defined.

Procedure: Ideally, observations are conducted annually. Realistically, only some programs consistently complete observations of all volunteers, with the remaining having varying percentages of volunteers observed.

Challenges/Payoffs: Interpreters rarely look forward to being observed, and some will ask to have their assessments postponed. Most volunteers understand the reasons for evaluation and accept it as a necessary part of their job. Furthermore, after completing the process, most have been pleased with and appreciative of the feedback.

Tool: (Example)

Large Mammal Interpreter Program Performance Review

Volunteer Name:

Observation Date:

Reviewer Name:

Location:

1. Communication Skills (elements include voice projection, eye contact, body language, vocabulary, adaptability to audience, approachability, enthusiasm)

Comments:

2. Interpretive Approach (elements include initiating conversations, use of questions to facilitate discovery, listening skills, closure to conversations)

Comments:

3. Use of Exhibit Links and Resources (awareness and effective use of objects exhibit elements, graphics, enclosure features, animal & staff activities)

Comments:

4. Use of Interpretive Objects (teeth, tusks, hide, poop, etc)

Comments:

5. Does the volunteer wear the required uniform? (LMIP uniform shirt and volunteer name tag)

Comments:

Reliability

Flexibility

Attitude

Comments:

Attachment 3: Evaluation Of Interpreter Performance By Peer Observation

Description: Unique method developed for tour guides by tour guides. It was developed because the length of tours (two hours) and the number of tour guides (40) made it difficult for the supervisor to complete annual evaluations for the entire program.

Procedure: Observed and assessed by other interpreters who accompany a tour. After one year of service, interpreters are assigned a date. Observer accompanies tour; uses tool; discusses with observed immediately afterwards, and reports to supervisor. Supervisor sends written assessment to observed.

Challenges/Payoffs: Similar to staff observation, this method does cause some discomfort by interpreters, although perhaps less so, since it is peer-to-peer. Peer Observation has increased the number of assessments completed annually, the time required to complete them is still a challenge. This method allows interpreter's strengths and weaknesses to be revealed making it easier to match their abilities with different types of tours and tour groups. The method is often of benefit to the observer as well, as following someone else's tour is a source of fun facts, ideas and approaches.

Tool: Developed over several months by active volunteers and staff. At the National Zoo, tours are not scripted, thus no particular content is required, only that content be accurate and adequate. Also, interpretive skills are considered as important as content.

Peer Observation Feedback Program - Highlights Tour Observation

Volunteer:

Observer:

Date:

Group Composition:

Special Circumstances:

Information

Adequate and accurate information in the following /areas:

National Zoo

Core: Mission, Smithsonian relation, BioPark

Additional: History, Front Royal, free admission, future plans, time for rest of visit/future visits

Comments:

FONZ

Core: Mission, volunteers

Additional: (Member Tour) History, sponsorship, areas of Zoo staffed by.
(General Public Tour) Membership

Comments:

Animal Information (at appropriate exhibits)

Core: Biology, behavior, conservation efforts, specific information on our collection.

Additional: Status in the wild.

Comments:

Exhibit Information (at appropriate exhibits)

Core: Purpose, meeting needs of animal

Additional: Keeper's work, historical perspective

Comments:

Interpretive Skills

Volunteer demonstrates effective interpretive skills in the following areas:

***Group management**

Core: Keeps group together, establishes rapport, solves problems in non-confrontational way.

Additional: Facilitates collective learning.

Comments:

Presentation

Core: Volume, eye contact, conversational interactive approach, encourages learning.

Additional: Rate, gestures, pacing, proximity, re-emphasizes important themes in various ways, utilized transitions, includes use of tactile objects, smells, movement, and other methods that reach visitors in a variety of ways.

Comments:

Handling questions & comments:

Core: Knows it's OK to say "I don't know," is a good listener, values and respects group members and their opinions and ideas, gives age appropriate answers, avoids patronizing answers.

Additional: Avoids jargon, invites questions.

Comments:

Flexibility

Core: Adapts to circumstances such as weather, crowd level, empty exhibit.

Additional: New acquisitions and exhibits, births.

Comments:

***Adapting to needs of the group**

Core: Educational background, interest, physical abilities, time constraints.

Additional: Ages, end point of tour.

Comments:

Enthusiasm/positive approach:

Core: Good FONZ/Zoo Ambassador, helps develop a sense of ownership, courteous

Additional: Knows when to use humor and patience, evokes a sense of wonder, shows warmth and sensitivity, avoids sarcasm.

Comments:

Overall Strengths

Suggestions For Improvement

General Comments

Supervisor's Comments:

*Reliability

*Punctuality & Attendance

*Flexibility

*Attitude

Comments:

Attachment 4: Evaluation Of Interpreter Performance By Tour Group Feedback

Description: Survey for visitors who were provided a pre-arranged tour.

Procedure: Supervisor telephones the contact for the tour group within a few days of their tour and explains that the survey is intended to improve the quality of future tours.

Challenges/Payoffs: Identifies significant strengths and weaknesses in tour guide strictly from the audience perspective so is a very good tool to evaluate interpretive skills but not as good for assessing accuracy of information.

Tool:

Zoo Guide Tour Participant Survey

Name of Group _____

Date of Tour _____

Type of tour _____

Zoo Guide _____

Group Composition _____

Other factors (weather, etc.) _____

Did you and your group enjoy your tour of the Zoo?

Was your tour what you expected it to be?

Was your guide knowledgeable and informative?

Did he/she give you the amount of information that you wanted (too much, too little)?

Was your guide's information and approach age appropriate?

Was your guide able to answer most of the questions from your group?

Was your guide able to adapt to any special circumstances (rain, crowds, strollers)?

Did your guide have an enthusiastic and positive attitude?

Any comments you would like to add?

Attachment 5: Evaluation Of Training By Interpreters

Description: This method allows staff to determine if they are meeting their responsibilities for providing complete, effective training, such that interpreters feel prepared for their work.

Procedure: New interpreters are asked for feedback at the conclusion of their initial training. (Content quizzes are also given, as much as a way to see if training was effective as to determine the interpreter's ability to learn). Feedback is reviewed by staff responsible for the training. **Challenges/Payoffs:** Feedback is extremely helpful in planning and developing subsequent trainings.

Tool:

Interpreter Evaluation of Administration (Annual Survey)

Attachment 6: Evaluation Of Program By Volunteers

Description: A periodic means of taking a big-picture look at the administration of the interpretive programs.

Procedure: Sent to all active interpreters annually. Results are summarized and reported back to the interpreters.

Challenges/Payoffs: Since responses can remain anonymous volunteers can be very candid giving interesting and constructive comments. Real program changes have resulted from comments found here. Some comments/complaints however are unsolvable (parking, weather, slow months) and this tool can become just a forum for venting.

Tool

Amazonia Interpreter Training - Training Assessment

Please complete this questionnaire to help us assess the Amazonia Interpreter Training class. Your input is essential in helping us to improve and enrich the volunteer experience.

Training Class

1.) What is your overall impression of the training?

_____ Excellent _____ Good _____ Fair _____ Needs Improvement

Content

2.) Using a 1-5 scale (with 5 representing the highest mark) how would you rate the usefulness and effectiveness of the following topics covered during training?

Topics	Rating					Comments
Mission and Overview	1	2	3	4	5	
Tropical Biology/Natural History	1	2	3	4	5	
Mature Forest Plants	1	2	3	4	5	
Elements of Interpretation	1	2	3	4	5	
Amazon Basin/BCI/STRI	1	2	3	4	5	
Science Gallery	1	2	3	4	5	
Pools 1, 2, 3, and 4	1	2	3	4	5	
Interpret a familiar object	1	2	3	4	5	

Dr. Brasil's Lab	1	2	3	4	5
Tour of the Exhibit	1	2	3	4	5
Interpretive Role-Playing	1	2	3	4	5
Exhibit Overview and Review	1	2	3	4	5
Mature Forest Animals	1	2	3	4	5
Volunteer Policies	1	2	3	4	5

- 3.) Were the instructors clear and helpful in their presentations and beyond?
- 4.) Which activity/ presentation did you find the most helpful? Why?
- 5.) Which activity/presentation did you find the least helpful? Why?
- 6.) Did the interpretive sessions help you feel prepared to begin conversations with visitors?
- 7.) Is the training manual clear and concise? Would you like to see anything added, deleted, or changed?

Format

- 8.) Were the training sessions

too long?	too short?	just right?
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- 9.) Was it convenient for you to attend Saturdays and weekday evenings? Would you have preferred all weekend days, all weekday evenings, or did you like the combination?
- 10.) Are there any sections of the training that you think should be eliminated, expanded, or changed?

Any additional comments?

VOLUNTEER FEEDBACK SURVEY
(NAME OF PROGRAM) EXHIBIT INTERPRETER PROGRAM

Please take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire to assess how well Friends of the National Zoo performed as a volunteer organization this past year. Your input is important in helping us to improve our programming and to enrich your volunteer experience.

How long have you been in the program?

1 year 2-4 years 5+ years

What did you find most rewarding as a volunteer this past year?

What did you find least rewarding?

Were you adequately trained to perform your duties?

Yes No

If no, what duties need further instructions?

Are there ways to improve support of your duties through facilities, equipment, in-service training, etc.?

Yes No

If yes, please be specific.

Are there ways that FONZ Program Supervisors could improve their support of your duties?

Yes No

If yes, please be specific.

Are you planning to continue as a volunteer in this program?

Yes No

If no, please explain why.

How many evening meetings did you attend as part of this volunteer program last year?

0-1 2-4 5-10 10+

How would you describe the number of evening meetings scheduled in your program?

Too many Not enough Just the right amount

Any other comments?

Name (Optional):