

TOUR GUIDES ALONG THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER



Welcome to our project called “Tour guides along the Mississippi River”. This project might not seem as THE one coming into your mind when thinking of the Mississippi but you will find out that it is truly exciting. There was a great range of topics we could choose from and I can tell you it was not easy. During our field trip along the Mississippi River and Delta, we had several guided tours, for instance through museums, at the battlefield in Vicksburg and in the French Quarter in New Orleans. All the tour guides had a certain personality which shaped their tour and made it individual. We found that we got really interested in the topic of tour guides, how they do their tour, how they shape it and how they use their personal background as an issue for their tour. Additionally, we found ourselves discussing a lot about the different tours and developed our personal opinions about the guides. That was the point when we chose to use this topic as our project to work on while we were on the road along the Mississippi. The goal was to create a questionnaire and ask our fellow travelers and professors what they thought of the tour guides we have seen. Unfortunately, we could not dwell on every tour guide in great detail as it would have gone too far for the purpose of this project but I think with the help of the questionnaire we are able to give a good insight into the different tours we experienced.

A tour guide? What's that?!



A tour guide is someone who shows visitors around an area, with the guide using extensive local knowledge to share the area with visitors. Tour guides are hired to help people navigate unfamiliar areas, and to make trips special, as a good tour guide sets a positive tone for a trip and shows people things they would not have discovered otherwise. Using a tour guide while traveling can also be useful because tour guides are very knowledgeable, and they can provide facts and information which help visitors interpret and understand the places they see. (Source: <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-tour-guide.htm>, 08.10.2010)

Expectations of tour guides by group members

The second question on our questionnaire, which you will see later on, was:

What do you expect from a tour guide in general?

This question is very important because we wanted to find out if the experiences of the different tours had met our expectations we had before we travelled to the Mississippi. Examining our questionnaires we found the following answers:

There were three main expectations which most of our fellow travellers had of tour guides, namely **information, reading the audience** and **entertainment**. Of course, we wanted to get information about the certain museum or city we were guided through. In addition, most of us expected to be read by the tour guide, which means that we expected him or her to respond to our cultural background (Germany, Austria and American) and to take our cultural experiences into account as well. And, of course, we wanted the tour guide to entertain us a bit and make his/her tour funny. Other answers to this question were **enthusiasm, knowledge, insiders** and **loud and clear voice**.

Who's the winner?

The winner was Randy, the tour guide we had seen twice: first in the French Quarter in New Orleans, and second on the Hurricane Rebirth Tour. Many participants liked Randy because he was funny and dramatic. He knew how to entertain us.



We saw him twice, so maybe everyone could just remember him best. Furthermore, I think Randy was the one who was easiest to grasp for us. He was not at all artificial, used his personal experiences and gave us a lot of insider tips, for instance the best seafood in town or the funkiest shopping street. I think we all liked him and somehow took him to our hearts because he really showed his emotions and did not just come up with facts on the Hurricane Rebirth Tour; therefore, he gave us the feeling of what it was really like to experience such devastation in one single night – it was just moving to listen to him telling his stories.

Tour guides and Cultural Studies?

Ok, so far so good. But how is the project connected to the theory of Cultural Studies? Some of the results of the questionnaire might shed some light on the underlying connections between the reception of tour guides and the concepts of Cultural Studies. Taking part in a tour guide is a concrete form of cultural practice. From the questionnaire we could gather that **objective information** as well as **entertainment** are crucial to the quality of a guide.



As we listen to the tour guides' presentations we will always be exposed to a **representation** of their **identity**. Will we ask ourselves to which degree do the guides share their personal beliefs with the audience. The person behind that presentation will slip into the role of the guide, being the center of attention. The person is conscious of the fact that for example humour is useful to get the attention of everyone. So no matter how funny that person actually is he or she will assume or be



interpellated to be a funny person once in the role of a tour guide. They might switch off that humour button as soon as the show is over.

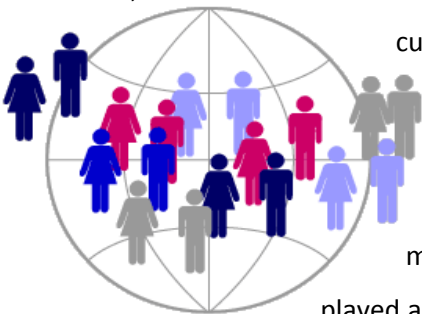
How much do their personalities influence the objectivity of the information that is passed on to us? Can we even tell whether the guide is sharing his genuine opinion, are they **authentic**? Or is the **performance** designed to mainly fulfill **commercial** purposes? Are they just putting on a show for us so that we will be entertained regardless of the objectivity or reliability of the contents?

During the trip many of the participants discussed this balance of:

entertainment/commercialism – objective information/authenticity

It seemed that the more entertaining and emotional or dramatic the guides were, the less objective they stayed. Nonetheless, many participants said that Randy was the best tour guide because he was funny, dramatic and he seemed to be personally involved in the subject.

After all, we wanted to find out how our perception of these tours is 'tainted' by our own cultural background. We will perceive various phenomena as typically 'american' because they stand out when we subconsciously compare them to ourselves, that is to our inherent **position**. "This is different to the way we do it – we are in the U.S.A. - therefore it must be 'American'". The concept of **ethnicity** and **minority** also played a major role in the questionnaire. Many questions regarding the tour guides' ethnicity - especially when dealing with historical issues such as slavery - provided a number of interesting results. In many situations these aspects were examined in combination with the importance of **objective information** and **self-positioning** on behalf of the guides themselves.



Interrelations:

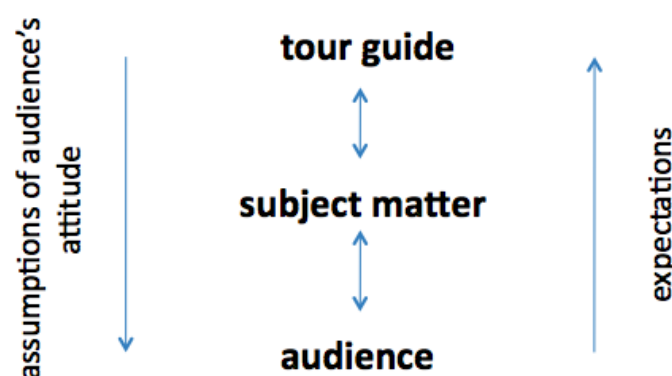
tour guide – subject matter – audience

We came up with a model that shows the interactions among all the elements that are involved in taking part in a tour guide. This model depicts the importance of the shifting perspectives of either

the producer of the tour or the recipient of the tour. These relations never work one-sidedly. They go both ways as indicated by the arrows in two directions.

Firstly, the representation of the subject matter depends strongly on the producer. Without the producer there wouldn't even exist a tour. The producer's cultural background shapes the style and the content of the tour. We expect a different presentation of a guide talking about New Orleans who actually comes from New Orleans, i.e. he is personally involved. Whereas a foreigner might present the town in a totally different way due to a different experience with the subject matter.

But the subject matter has a strong effect on the representation of the producer as well. We had the opportunity to see two very different sides of the same guide. In Randy's first tour about the French Quarter in New Orleans he was very cheerful, funny and relaxed. We were able to observe how enthusiastic and proud he was about his hometown. In the second tour Randy drove us through the quarters of the town that suffered strongly from the effects of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. This subject matter of a serious and sad kind obviously made Randy seem to be very serious and sad as well. This shows that the subject matter itself has the power to evoke certain feelings or associations. The interesting thing here was, that in the second tour Randy shared many personal details with his audience, such as his homosexuality and the death of his life partner. He also used strategies of dramatic suspense by giving us a timeline before, during and after the hurricane to demonstrate the vastness of the misery and the helplessness of the victims. He provided a very vivid image of the individual experience of such a disaster by chronically describing what he and other citizens were doing during that timeline.



The audience will shape the tour when the guide addresses the audience. In many of the tours we had the opportunity to ask questions. Obviously we chose the questions, therefore we actually produced or initiated a part of that tour ourselves. In these moments we position ourselves to the subject matter and reflect on our own relation to the topic. Also, depending on how well the audience responds to humour the guide will continue or stop making the tour funny.

Very similarly the topic evokes certain associations and images in our mind. Like Randy we were really enthusiastic about the French Quarter but also very sad about the devastation of the Hurricane. The subject matter can influence us in such a degree that it will make us different people after the tour. We might think differently because we were able to look into someone else's perspective.

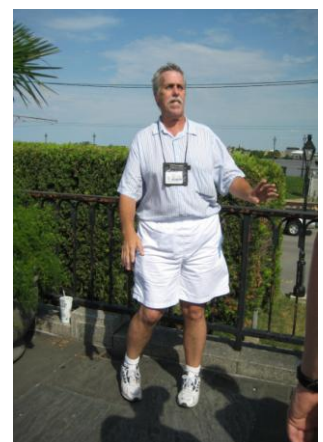
By considering the audience's attitude toward the subject matter the tour guide will present the subject matter in a certain way. That means that the tour depends on the assumptions and considerations of the tour guide. We observed that many guides tried to speak more slowly and clearly to us assuming that we as foreigners wouldn't understand otherwise. Sometimes a guide would go into more detail explaining the historical background that would probably not be necessary for American tourists. The tour guide might use humour as a strategy to get the attention of the audience but only if he is convinced that we will understand the jokes.

The audience will have certain expectations about the subject matter before the tour has started. We will think of our background knowledge which will serve as a basis for taking up new information. We might also be prejudiced and wait for 'typical' features to come up or read into the words or gestures of the guide to make it fit to our stereotypes.

In order to find out about the travellers' feelings and attitudes towards the various tour guides and their presentation of sites, a questionnaire was compiled and evaluated. Certain trends but also surprises (at least to us as the ones carrying out the questionnaire) could be discovered which shall now be presented.

Trends:

One of the most striking trends was that the majority of travellers approved of tour guides who were not scared of revealing their **emotions**. Randy, a tour guide in New Orleans, was a prototypical example for this as he openly expressed his feelings concerning his return to his home after the incredibly destructive Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Still, it has to be said that some Randy participants felt a bit awkward when being confronted with this personal and intimate insight into his thoughts and wished for more factual information.



Randy

Another part of the questionnaire focused on how the participants perceived the **presentation of**



slavery by white tour guides. Two tour guides, Randy from New Orleans and Mrs Tanner giving us a tour on a plantation in Frogmore, LA were compared concerning how they pictured slavery. Most participants of our questionnaire felt that Mrs Tanner's portrayal of slavery was rather undermining and inappropriate, whereas Randy was perceived to have given a more differentiated and appropriate perspective on this part of the history of the United States. All in all, it can be said that the answers concerning Randy were much more balanced and Mrs Tanner's depiction of slavery evoked more controversial feelings.



Mrs Tanner

After our visit to Frogmore Plantation, we were given a tour at the African American Museum in Natchez by an African American tour guide. These two encounters were compared in the questionnaire in order to find out in how far **the tour guide's ethnicity** shaped these tours. It could clearly be seen that tour guide's ethnicity played a significant role for all of the participants as it was assumed to lead to a totally different representation and perception of a site. Furthermore, the tour guide's professional background and his/her intentions were perceived to play an essential role as well. The questionnaire revealed that the participants would have wished for a reverse of tour guides at the African American museum and at Frogmore Plantation in order to obtain a completely different experience.



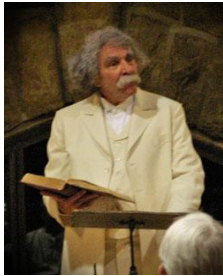
Sister Aston

The tour which was probably perceived the **most controversial** and maybe even disturbing was given by Sister Aston at the Nauvoo Visitor's Center presenting the major beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. According to the evaluation of the questionnaire, there were no participants who positioned themselves as understanding or appreciative listeners. Most of them felt like clear outsiders and were rather annoyed and distanced towards Sister Aston's tour.

Surprises:

Since **Sister Aston's tour** received hardly any approval, we (the composers of the questionnaire) were surprised of the fact that the majority of participants felt that her **tears** while talking about the love of Jesus to all of us were real although most of these answers were accompanied with cynic comments ("yes, I'm afraid they were real").

Another surprise was that **Valerie Pape**, a University Professor from Bradley University showing us her hometown Dubuque and providing a delicious barbeque for our group was regarded as a tour guide by more participants than a **Mark Twain impersonator** at a show in Hannibal. Unfortunately, the reasons for these perceptions could not be identified by the questionnaire.



Mark Twain impersonator



Valerie Pape

Last but not least we would like to thank everyone who participated in our survey!



Questionnaire: Representation of sites by tour guides along the Mississippi river

1. Try to remember all the tour guides you have met so far on this trip.

Which one do you remember best?

Why this one?

2. What do you expect from a tour guide in general?

Would you consider Valerie Pape and the Mark Twain imitator as tour guides?

yes no

3. Do you think a tour guide should express his/her emotional and personal feelings?

yes no

Only answer the following question if you were on Randy's Rebirth tour:

What did you think of his tour?

I felt bored.

 comfortable.

 sympathy.

 embarrassed.

 awkward.

I thought it was ridiculous.

- I expected more factual information.
- more emotions.

Other: _____

Only answer the following question if you were on Ellen's Rebirth tour:

What did you think of her tour?

- I felt bored.
- comfortable.
- sympathy.
- embarrassed.
- awkward.

I thought it was ridiculous.

- I expected more factual information.
- more emotions.

Other: _____

4. What expectations did you have of a white tour guide talking about slavery?

How did you perceive Randy's (New Orleans) portrayal of slavery?

- undermining appropriate differentiating extensive
- biased neutral politically correct
- controversial other: _____

How did you perceive Ms Tanner's (Frogmore Plantation) portrayal of slavery?

- undermining appropriate differentiating extensive
- biased neutral politically correct
- controversial other: _____

5. How did you position yourself during Sister Aston's (Nauvoo) tour?

- As a(n) distanced listener
- understanding listener
- appreciative listener
- interested listener
- annoyed listener
- embarrassed listener
- superior listener
- outsider

Do you think her tears were real?

- yes no

6. In how far do you think did the ethnicity of the tour guides at Frogmore and at the Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture shape their tours differently?