

# In conversation ...

*Marge Ainsley* talks to Kate Carreno about her experiences of undertaking qualitative research

**F**our years ago when the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (SCVA) was closed to the public for major refurbishment, it wasn't just building work happening behind their closed doors. Taking advantage of the space available, part of the SCVA became a test bed for evaluating the physical and intellectual accessibility of the former and proposed displays. Coincidentally, the planning for the redisplay and research took place as the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) was coming into force, which made it an even timelier piece of work.

The redisplay was being designed by George Sexton Associates (GSA), an international museum, exhibition and architectural lighting design practice which had worked on Sainsbury Centre displays since the building first opened in the 1970s. For this research, GSA mocked up display cases, complete with 3D 'life-size' models of objects of various shapes

and sizes, wall-mounted cases and shelving, and a table case and chairs.

OPERA, a Norwich-based market research agency, was commissioned to consult with a range of key audiences, to test whether these new designs provided 'access for all'. Led by Martyn Richards, now a qualitative consultant, the research featured a number of respondents from members of the public and representatives of specialist organisations. They were allowed to wander through the display, during which photos were taken to illustrate key behaviours. Afterwards, they were interviewed, both in terms of their attitudes to the display cabinets and the reasons for their behaviour.

I talked to the then Deputy Director, Public Services and Administration, Kate Carreno (now Assistant Director, Central Services, at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) about her experiences of qualitative research.



James Dexter, Disability Co-ordinator at UEA, ponders the proposed new display cases (GSA)



Have we got the height right? (GSA)



An innovative solution to displaying very small objects in an accessible way (GSA)

**MA: What benefits did you gain from choosing this particular methodology?**

KC: As we were in the unusual position of being able to do the research on-site while closed (albeit in a corner of what was still a building site at that point), we benefited from ‘real’ testing. We could observe how the participants reacted in the actual space, as well as interview them. We gained a lot from just watching their behaviour.

**MA: Were there any concerns held by staff prior to the research?**

KC: Design and display are part of the SCVA’s original vision and lie at the very heart of our identity. There was some nervousness that the research results might undermine or even threaten this. I worried that we might not be able to implement some of the recommendations if they were at odds with the core design vision. I have to say these concerns were never expressed by the designers, GSA, who were really happy to engage with the process.

**MA: Was there anything that surprised you about the research findings?**

KC: One of the most pleasant surprises was how positive the participants were about our decision to stay with the original vision. They were also pleased we were doing the research into accessibility in the first place.

**MA: What impact did the research have on the redisplay and the organisation?**

KC: As well as providing a better experience for those visiting the new

displays and helping us to identify improvements, it got the team to think more about the needs of visitors. Putting visitors at the heart of what we do is now an important concern in the design of our current temporary exhibitions.

**MA: How did you disseminate the research findings? What worked best?**

KC: The research agency presented to the SCVA management team, Chair of the SCVA board and the redisplay steering group. An article about the research was included in *Exhibit*, the magazine that we produced and distributed to our visitors and stakeholders while we were closed. The research findings were also shared with our new front-of-house team as part of their induction. This helped them answer any questions from visitors once we reopened about why we’d done certain things with the redisplay.

**MA: Did you learn anything new as a client about this kind of research?**

KC: Focusing a visitor research project on aspects of display and design was new territory for us. It was initially quite a scary prospect to be championing it in a very design-led environment. However, it gave staff much more of a sense of shared ownership of the redisplay, and also meant that we could refer back to it when we got the (very occasional) negative comment from visitors. There certainly isn’t anything I would have done differently if I was to do this type of research again.

**MA: What tips would you give others who are thinking about whether to do qualitative research?**

KC: 1. Go for it! 2. Include costs for conducting qualitative research in the overall project budget. 3. Select a researcher who understands your organisation. 4. Reassure those who might be nervous about it by involving them in the planning of the research, writing the brief and the selection of the consultant. 5. Share the results with stakeholders.

**MA: Have the benefits of the project justified the financial investment in the research?**

KC: Definitely, the cost of this research was a small percentage of the overall cost of the redisplay, and worth every penny.

**Links**

- SCVA [www.scva.ac.uk](http://www.scva.ac.uk)
- GSA [www.gsadc.com](http://www.gsadc.com)
- Martyn Richards [www.martynrichardsresearch.com](http://www.martynrichardsresearch.com)
- DDA (2005) [www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2005/ukpga\\_20050013\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2005/ukpga_20050013_en_1)

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