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Every museum label for all? Reflection on inclusive and communicative writing.

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Abstract. Since our PhD, we aim to rethink the transposition of universal design (UD) in museums for narratives, specifically on labels. We have conceptualised a model of universal label, adding inclusive and communicative writing: inclusive, by using universal design merging on the same device several forms of communication (sign language, Braille, easy to read); communicative, because it explains and learns how citizens perceived as disabled communicate. UD writing could initiate and encourage communication. In this paper, we applied our reflections on UD writing to the label of The Mona Lisa at the Louvre Museum.

Keywords. museum, cultural heritage, mediation, label, Universal Design, inclusion, communication, Sign Language, Braille, Easy to read.

1. Introduction

According to statistics, 29% of Europeans aged 16 or over with a disability are at higher risk of poverty or social exclusion (France 23.8%)². What can be done for a social Europe? How to combat social exclusion? How can disabled and non-disabled people be involved? Where can we experiment with the inclusion of citizens? In the light of this alarming finding, the European Commission aims to decrease the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, with the ambitious *Strategy for Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030*³. This strategy proposes to give more rights to people with disabilities in all areas of life and to improve their independent living and autonomy as well as equal access and non-discrimination, which means equal opportunities in life. Specifically in the field of culture, the Commission calls on Member States to “make more art collections and museums accessible to persons with disabilities”⁴.

At the international level, the museum is an institution that seeks and experiments with a social role. Since the new ICOM museum definition of August 2022, a museum has to be “accessible and inclusive”⁵. Moreover, according to the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections,

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² Statistics Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/hlth_dpe010/default/table?lang=en

³ European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

⁴ Union of Equality:

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8376&furtherPubs=yes>

⁵ ICOM: <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/>

their Diversity and their Role in Society (2016)⁶: “Museums are vital public spaces that should address all of society” and “The social role of museums, along with the preservation of heritage, constitutes their fundamental purpose”. But how can museum collections be made more accessible? How can all publics be included? The tool of inclusion is universal design (UD), which is defined and promoted in the general obligations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, Article 2, 2006)⁷, as “the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design”. From our perspective, museums are therefore both inclined to take more responsibility for inclusive work and predisposed to develop universal design.

Our approach in the field of Information and Communication Sciences is based in the relationship between the museum, publics and a third-party mediator, in museum education (mediation) [4]. We develop an empirical research which is born in our PhD on inclusion in fine arts museums in France and North America [11]. Since, we observed how cultural institutions concretize inclusive mediation. In this paper, after defining universal mediation, we will focus on museum labels as well as on our proposal for inclusive and communicative writing, and then apply it to a label. For this experimentation, we choose the most famous masterpiece of the Louvre, *The Mona Lisa*, which recently change its written mediation on label and room panel.

2. From universal design to universal mediation

2.1. UD in mediation

At present, in museums, disabled or disadvantaged publics are generally separated with responses to their special needs. They must justify these needs for access to additional devices (such as Braille and tactile booklets) or book special tours (e.g., in sign language) or be selected for tailored programmes. There is a proliferation of specific tools, which require visitors to declare their disabilities or disadvantages before entering the museum: this is not inclusion. Universal Design is not actually deployed in museums for mediation. Only a flexible version of UD is employed and recommended by the French government, allowing the addition of separate devices: putting in place “diverse systems” to meet “the diversity of needs”, “even if each device, in its specificity, is not accessible to all” [16]. What about UD in a strict version with only one device for everyone? We observed just one device for all (combining all special needs responses) at the Musée de la Musique in Paris [11-10]. Why? Our analysis is that mediators (museum educators) are not trained in issues of disabled and disadvantaged publics: there is a lack of knowledge. So, mediators are not able to merge all the answers. Moreover, in France, UD focuses in particular on wheelchair users and visually impaired people (as in Denmark and Norway [14]). In the field of mediation devices in museums, one French company is the market leader, focusing on the Braille transposition and tactile reproduction of the exhibit for touching. Another company focuses on sign language translation. Each company promotes UD, but none combines all the solutions.

⁶ UNESCO, *Recommendation*, 2016: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246331>

⁷ UNCRPD, *Art. 2*, 2006: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-2-definitions.html>

In concrete terms, what is the difference between accessibility and UD? Accessibility consists in responding each special need by creating specific tools and multiplying responses. Universal design is the creation of only one tool including all the solutions to special needs, a single tool for all that anyone can use. In the process towards inclusion (UNESCO *Guidelines for Inclusion*, 2005)⁸, accessibility corresponds to the step of integration: society is able to UNDERSTAND special needs, but these are outside the norm. Universal design is the last step of inclusion and corresponds to knowledge: society will KNOW, it will have learned about special needs and then considered all citizens. Therefore, the standards are changing.

UD was created by Ronald Mace in the 1980s for architecture and design. Therefore, it did not initially think about narratives. Later in the 2000s, Universal Design for Learning was adapted for schools/education and aimed to provide students with multiple ways of understanding. Now, considering the language dimension of mediation [2], we aim to rethink the transposition of universal design in museums, specifically for narratives: our focus is on labels [12-6].

2.2. From the simple to the universal label: a typology of labels

The museum label is a small text that establishes a mediation relationship between the visitor and the exhibit [7]. A label accompanies and documents every exhibit [3]. They are inscribed in a “relationship of dependence” [13]: the label creates an exhibit [6] but cannot exist independently [13].

We have recently proposed a typology of labels [8]. In addition to the simple label (with only minimal information about the exhibit) and the developed label (with additional texts such as descriptions, details, comparisons), we add three other types of labels: vulgarised, partially accessible and universal labels. Their specific characteristics are the following:

The *vulgarised label* applies the Louvre's vulgarisation charter [17]: this label does not repeat the information of the simple label, because it implies a systematic explanatory action on the scientific vocabulary used and the technical terms mobilised. This begins with the title of the exhibition, which can be completed or reworded. Arabic numerals are used to facilitate understanding, and the historical sites are indicated according to contemporary geography. In addition, as in the developed label, a short text provides details about the exhibition.

- The *partially accessible label* designates labels that do not meet all the conditions of accessibility, i.e., they do not take into account the four disabilities of motor, mental, auditory and visual impairments: e.g., tactile stations or polysensory devices that do not have a translation in sign language. Indeed, deaf people need information other than written language, which they do not know well (80% illiteracy in France, but the easy to read – simple writing method – helps to understand written language).
- The *universal label* implements universal design, the key element of inclusion. This way, obstacles and disability situations are anticipated from the design stage, all accessibility is gathered and included into a single device: it is then a

⁸ UNESCO, *Guidelines for inclusion*, 2005: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000140224>

matter of innovating by thinking for all (inclusion), and no longer limiting ourselves to specific adaptations (integration).

We have previously analysed a complete universal device [11-10] – not label –, including in particular:

- o Height and displacement designed for visitors in wheelchairs,
- o Vulgarised and pictorial text,
- o 3D tactile modules and sensory modules for visually impaired visitors,
- o Braille translation for visually impaired visitors who can read Braille (i.e., 10,000 French people),
- o Video in sign language for deaf signing visitors (i.e., 100,000 French people).

All these layers of understanding, mixed in the same tool, meet the needs of disabled publics and the preferences of the general public.

3. Each museum label for all: the example of label of *The Mona Lisa* at the Louvre

3.1. Current Mona Lisa label

During our PhD, we have adopted qualitative observation and interview methods to study in particular the Louvre Museum Charter [11], which proposes a new approach to the vulgarisation of museum labels. Since, focusing on “the communicative dimension of accessibility” [5] through an immediate understanding, we conducted experiments through university projects with our students and research projects in our laboratory. We were able to concretely realise, on the one hand, the complexity of applying accessibility guidelines, and on the other hand, the lack of links between responses to disabilities. In the light of these obstacles and the gap between guidelines and reality, we conceptualised a universal design model for museum labels (a *universal label*), to which we added *inclusive and communicative writing* [8]: inclusive, by using universal design combining several forms of communication (sign language, Braille, easy to read) on the same device; communicative, because it explains and learns how citizens perceived as disabled communicate. This UD writing could initiate and encourage communication [8]. The framework for this reflection is Article 21.b of the 2006 UNCRPD⁹ on freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information: “Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions”.

When we tried to reproduce the universal label, we observed the need to produce a large device: it seems impossible for each museum label. So, we elaborated a reflection on how to apply universal design to all museum labels, focusing on the exhibit title [9]:

⁹ UNCRPD, Art. 21, 2006: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-21-freedom-of-expression-and-opinion-and-access-to-information.html>

UD writing could then be used on any type of label (simple, developed, vulgarised, partially accessible, and universal label). For this example of UD writing on a label, we chose *The Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci, as presented in June 2021 at the Louvre Museum (figure 1). The mediation has been rethought, and the label was vulgarised, duplicated and placed directly in the queue. Furthermore, there are larger panels with numerous details about the masterpiece in another part of the room, behind the painting.



Figure 1. The vulgarized *Mona Lisa* label, duplicated throughout the “zig-zag” queue, to reach the painting visible at the far left, photo by author, 2021.

With regard to the English translation of the labels, the Louvre's instructions are to include only: title of the work, subtitle, date, materials used, and development text, if applicable [15]. It should be noted that the developmental text explaining the title is also translated.

Furthermore, the Louvre's vulgarisation charter seems to have been applied to this label. It can be observed that:

- Arabic numerals are used (no Roman numerals);

- As regards geography, the city of Amboise was recontextualised in its country (France), but not the town of Vinci (which is in present-day Italy);
- The title of the work has not changed since the last label, but it is still not clear with this succession of names, of which the usual title of the work (in French *La Joconde*) is placed at the end of this very long title, while it should be the first information provided;
- A short text explaining about the diminutive Monna in Italian was added.

The intellectual accessibility sought by the work of rewriting this label does not seem to us to have been achieved, both because of the non-reformulation of the title and failure to place the town of Vinci in contemporary geography. Moreover, the opportunity of the queue could be used, for example to disseminate various details of the masterpiece (even rapidly, in order not to slow down the queue). In any case, in our opinion, the vulgarised label itself is not really accessible because hearing and visual impairments are not included.

3.2. Model of UD writing for *The Mona Lisa* label

To apply our inclusive and communicative writing (or UD writing) to a label, we rely on 4 main elements [8]:

1. Sign language drawing: like using in dictionary, where the different hand positions are separated to explain how to form signs. Adding signs for titles on the label could be interesting for everyone. On the deaf side: to enrich and spread the language; to overcome the lack of accessibility with only a small selection of explained exhibits; to make sign language visible in a world of hearing people and oralisation. On the general public side: to have a pictorial vision and to de-centre from written language; to become familiar with sign language; for cultural sharing.
2. Braille Neue font: rather than juxtaposing Braille, the Braille Neue font (created by Kosuke Takahashi) aims to combine the Braille and the Latin alphabets. Therefore, Braille readers would discover each exhibit's title, and other visitors (visually impaired or sighted) would gradually learn Braille and be able to use it regularly.
3. Luciole font: researchers have recently created an optimal readability font for visually impaired people. This font must also be high-contrast and in large print.
4. Easy to read: simple illustrative writing method with a clear layout, applicated or at least validated by intellectually disabled people (we use only the spirit of easy to read if the text is not validated by the persons concerned). It is also helpful for people who have reading difficulties, who are learning a language, who come from other countries or also for deaf people. It is useful for adults and children, as a starting point for explanations.

Let us now apply these considerations about UD writing to the label of *The Mona Lisa* (figure 2).

LA JOCONDE

Léonard de VINCI
 Vinci (Italie actuelle), 1452 - Amboise (France), 1519

Peinte vers 1503-1519 About 1503-1519
 Huile sur bois Oil on panel



La Joconde ou *La Gioconda* (en italien) car la femme sur ce portrait est mariée à Francesco del Giocondo.
 Son nom est Lisa Gherardini, c'est pourquoi en italien elle est aussi appelée *Monna Lisa* qui veut dire Dame Lisa.

The Mona Lisa (title in English)
 Nickname of the woman in this portrait, from an Italian abbreviation Monna Lisa (with two N) which means Lady Lisa because her name is Lisa Gherardini.
 She is called also *La Joconde* in French and *La Gioconda* in Italian because she is married to Francesco del Giocondo.

Acquis par François Ier en 1518
 INV. 779

Peintures / Italie / 1500-1600



Figure 2. Proposition by author of *The Mona Lisa* label with UD writing.

First, we decided to simplify the title to the usual French *La Joconde* and develop the explanation in the text development. We then we proposed to use:

1. Sign language drawing of the title at the top right: the French *Joconde* sign, which corresponds to bringing twice arms together, one on top of the other with closed fists, focusing attention on the woman's crossed hands in the painting.
2. Braille Neue font for the title on the top left and the audio guide number on the bottom right: large and different characters make it possible to identify the title and numbers. We propose this organisation, which could become a convention, so that the blind public can know where the Braille information is positioned on each label.
3. Luciole font for the remaining text. Furthermore, we used large print, and different contrasts to provide nuances and avoid the text block effect.

4. Easy-to-read spirit for reorganising the explanatory text of the title for better comprehension, first in French and then in English through the various official titles.

For comfortable reading in autonomy, it is also necessary to think about the positioning of the label (at wheelchair height, inclined for reading Braille, for several visitors to stand in front of, etc.) and the guidance to it (to ensure the safety of visitors and exhibits).

4. To conclude: perspectives of UD writing

We think that it is important to consider inclusion as a way to speak to everyone through universal design and not to lead to the proliferation of devices for segmented publics. In museums, a “universal mediation” [11] device could then be used in all autonomy, according to one’s own needs or preferences, without justifying a condition or impairment, without being specific, on request or reservation. Intended for all publics, the use of a single mediation device for all could allow “cultural sharing”[1].

By including the means of communication of citizens perceived as disabled (a mother tongue with sign language, a writing with Braille, a rewriting with easy to read) in UD writing, we want to illustrate that they are not in another society: they are members of our society but their forms of communication are not recognised to the extent of their importance. So, we believe that making sign language, Braille and easy to read visible would encourage meeting, exchanging and breaking down barriers: our inclusive and communicative writing could allow all publics to understand each other and also to communicate with each other in order to share cultural heritage. With this UD writing, we could add a new transposition of discourse: after from scientific to vulgarised, from vulgarised to inclusive and communicative [8].

Moreover, the application of UD writing to the label’s titles would not be limited to a selection of exhibits, as is often the case in accessibility, but could be applied to all exhibits in and outside museums. In doing so, we could add an essential function to the label text, which, in addition to giving a voice to the exhibit [12], could allow it to address all publics and give them equal importance. We used to find one global device and others for disabilities or disadvantages, but with this reflection on UD writing, we could find a device for all and together constitute a “universal public” [11].

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