Interpretation and stories

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This article is based on a presentation delivered at the ICOMOS 'Telling Tales' conference in October 2003. It promotes the view that interpretation and stories share a relationship, and that collectively this relationship offers a variety of effective techniques for enriching the experience of visitors. Whilst the focus for this presentation was on tours, the concepts, principles and techniques can be adapted for use in most interpretive and other visitor-based programs. The paper does not intend to promote the view that such a relationship is the only way or the best way to focus such efforts when enriching the visitor experience. It is but one way, and one way which can be quite effective.

‘Once upon a time …’

‘Once upon a time’ … has been used for aeons to announce the start of a story and instil some sense of expectancy and excitement within an audience. There are many modern day equivalents – ‘Past want to hear a secret?’, ‘Have I told you about the time that …’. Sometimes the announcement of story might be the simple parting of a theatre curtain, or the silent and engaging presence of a person dressed in character, or the first strum of a guitar by a folk guitarist. The magical charm and engaging power of stories have been enriched by people for thousands of years. Enter the modern world and stories have lost little of these qualities. They continue to energise such social gathering places of society as pubs. They continue to enthrall and captivate eager listeners. They continue to be used to get a ‘point across’, and they continue to remain a record of our memories and other significant experiences. In short they are often the vessel that brings things to life.

This potential to bring things to life is where interpretation shares centre stage with stories.

A few perspectives on interpretation

‘The best interpretation comes from the heart and is laced with imagination, creativity, inspiration, relevance and personal commitment.’ (Tilden)

‘Interpretation is a means of communicating ideas and feelings, which help people enrich their understanding and appreciation of the world and their role within it.’ (Interpretation Australia Association)

‘The essence of good interpretation is that it reveals a new insight into what makes a place special. It gives people new understanding.’ (James Carter, A Sense of Place)

Distilling the above perspectives, we’ll refer to interpretation within this article as providing the opportunity for people to engage with and be inspired by the stories, meanings and/or significance of people, things, and other ‘stuff’.

What are stories?

‘A narrative or tale of real or fictitious events’ (Helen McKay and Berice Dudley)

Interpretation and stories... what do they share?

They both:

- Share the aim of bringing ‘stuff’ to life
- Involve people
- Involve relationships
- Focus on a particular perspective

Engage an intended audience

And they can enrich the visitor experience by:

Seeking to engage people – finding and working with the stories about, of and in people

Focusing on a message / storyline / theme – so that the ‘experience’ goes somewhere

Enriching the moments within that experience

Encouraging us to have fun and enjoy ourselves

Engaging people

Some of the ways we can engage visitors include:

Making the activity relevant

Getting to know about the visitor and building rapport

Making the activity accessible

Engaging People – making your activity relevant to people

You can have the best activity in the world but unless it is relevant to someone and that someone gets to hear about it then you’ll be running the activity on your own. One way to maximise the chances of making your activity relevant and enjoying some company whilst leading this activity is to answer the WIIFM question. The WIIFM question = What’s In It For Me? (with the me being from your visitors’ perspective) What do you believe the visitor wants to gain from your activity? What needs and motivations do they want to satisfy? What expectations will they bring?
The responses to these questions provide a solid platform from which to start developing and marketing an activity that would be the most appropriate and relevant for a target group of visitors. Previous or current evaluations from visitors can help immensely in this quest. I still remember my first interpretive activity and how I managed to talk endlessly for almost 90 minutes, thinking all the while that such an endless stream of gabbing commentary was what the visitors were after.

It didn't take me long to realise that a commentary needed to involve the visitor and focus on what the visitor wanted as much and if not more than what I wanted to share. It needed to have varying degrees of silence and self-discovery, of fun and gossip, and of space for people to enjoy the experience in their own way. I was more a facilitator than a commentator of information. The challenge was in delivering a message I wanted to share in a way that was still relevant to the varying characteristics of different visitors and visitor groups.

A final point concerning relevance is that an activity also needs to be relevant to you and to the environment you are working within.

Engaging people – getting to know them in person and building rapport

We can get to know people at almost any point of their relationship with our activity. But in most cases it will start once we first meet them and continue throughout our activity.

The dialogue and conversation

Our initial dialogue provides us with a great opportunity to find out about what people are after, and to confirm or edit our initial perceptions. It also provides us with the opportunity to check in with their understanding of certain concepts (such as those we'll be sharing during the activity), gaining a feel for the 'social' environment in which the activity will take place, and to simply enjoy a healthy bit of chit chat and start building rapport.

Engaging people – making your activity accessible

Harvey Jones once said: 'In my experience it is extremely difficult to teach grown up people anything. It is however relatively easy to create the conditions under which people will teach themselves.' And so we could extend this to interpretive activities and seek to create the conditions for people to enjoy the experience. This is as much about attracting people as it is about removing barriers and making the activity accessible – not just to the physical domains but also emotional and cognitive domains. Emotional access relates to how people feel, to their emotional states. Our aim is to evoke a positive emotional state for visitors, one that allows them to relax and enjoy the experience. For example, at a basic level people like to feel safe and unless they feel safe they will find it hard to give you their total attention. Generating a favourable emotional state can also include making the experience captivating, stimulating, provocative, exciting, and fun.

Cognitive access relates to the intellectual processing of information. For example, explaining a concept using technical language and speaking in jargon-tongue will limit the ability of people to access and make sense of this concept. It might well evoke a mental workout as they try to decipher the language, but before long this workout will lead to fatigue and this fatigue will motivate them to switch off and focus elsewhere. As a general rule it's best to keep language simple – some say keep it to the comprehension level of a person in their mid-teens. And if trying to share a concept that might be hard to grasp try working with metaphors and analogies. For example:

- 'Imagine life fading away for a whole MCG crowd ... Around 80,000 Victorians need help and care in reducing the impact of blindness and vision impairment.' (Advertisement for Vision Australia Foundation)

- 'The length of the blood vessels in the human body is 96,000ks. To give you an idea of how long that is, if you strung the vessels end to end such that they followed the coastline of Australia, you'd still have approximately 25,000ks of vessels left over (which means you'd have enough left over to travel between Sydney and Perth approximately 5 times).'

- 'The movement of water is influenced by an aquifer. An aquifer is like a big underground pavement and groundwater is affected in the same way as rain falling on a pavement.'

Making sure your experience goes somewhere – working with themes

A good story should 'go somewhere'. A good story should have a succession of events that lead toward a climax. A good story should be able to justify the use of characters, events and place in moving the story toward this climax. This can relate to simple things like the use of language – a nineteenth-century character talking about their recent travels across the landscape should not be using kilometres to describe distance (kilometres came into language many years later). The use of kilometres would be incongruent with the story. Working with themes is one way to help ensure your activity is 'going somewhere' and is focused on a set of messages.

Read the following and try and make sense out of what is being said:

- LAZY IN HIS HIS TALKING DESK
- SAT THE TO DISTANT AT BOY
- FRIENDS ON PHONE FISH WHILST
- SLOUCHED SPEAKER FASHION
- PAST AND PINK FLEW COMPUTER
- WINDOW

Now read the following and once again try and make sense out of what is being said:

- THE LAZY BOY SAT IN SLOUCHED
- FASHION AT HIS COMPUTER DESK
- WHILST TALKING TO DISTANT
- FRIENDS ON SPEAKER PHONE AND
- PINK FISH FLEW PAST HIS WINDOW

And now a quick quiz? Which collection of words was easier to visualise and connect with? I would take a guess and say that it was the second passage. And the reason why is because in the majority of cases you can help people better understand a passage of information if it is presented in some sort of order. Spouting information in an ad hoc manner does little to help people learn. People would only have just digested one parcel of information before they have to create a new space in their mind to digest another. They find it hard to correlate the relationship between pieces of information – as was the case in the first passage.

The beauty of themes is that they create congruence and
relationships between pieces of information, such that things make sense and that pieces of information follow a central thread that has some direction and purpose to it. It feeds into a central message and focus. Hopefully this was demonstrated by the second passage. As a simple example let’s say I wanted to promote the significance of alleyways and develop the following series of four tours, each with a unique theme:

- Stepping into the alleyway of any city reveals many stories of its past.
- Alleyways are an often overlooked part of our urban history.
- Getting backstage in the urban landscape.
- Alleyways are an endangered species.

If you were to take part in each of the above four activities I’d hope that each activity would provide you with its unique perspective of alleyways, and that each of these unique perspectives would be reflected by the theme. Thus working with themes means you need to make choices in what to leave out as much as what to put in.

This ability to create a diverse mix of activities is also relevant to the concept of developing a tourism matrix for a nominated precinct. Rather than run the one tour of a precinct why not run a few, each following a unique theme. This empowers the visitor with the opportunity to choose from three activities rather than one, and subsequently there might be a greater chance that there is an activity more closely related to their interests.

In summary – themes help to:

- Reveal messages – and these messages are not just in what we say but also in what we do (promoting minimal impact practices in fragile wilderness will lose its impact if you are standing on an endangered species whilst delivering this message.);
- Provide a thread for the ‘must knows’ you want to share with visitors;
- Focus your activity on the unique elements you want to share;
- Set up relationships between ‘pieces of information’ which in turn makes it easier for people to understand;
- Provide choice for your visitor by creating a tourism matrix of product offerings.

**Enriching the moments within the visitors’ experience**

**The moments which make up our journey in life**

One of the aims of interpretation should be to bring colour and richness to the moment. So much of what we remember in life are ‘moments’. The fun times, the tragedies, the kisses and intimate encounters, ‘the time we …’, or ‘what about when Billy …’, or ‘do your remember the party when …’. So in a way our journeys through life are like a relationship between a series of moments. The journeys for visitors are also about relationships. A quick question – when do these relationships begin and when do they end? Do they begin when the visitor first arrives at the activity? Do they being when the visitor reads about the activity in a brochure? Do they begin when people made the booking for the activity? And when do they end? … If indeed they ever end.

**The colour and richness we find in diversity**

Life is in colour – and the same with interpretation. Landscapes are not sterile so if we are assisting people experience a landscape whether it is in the present, the past or the future we should bring colour and life to the same story. One way to achieve this is by ensuring the information we share is provided in a variety of forms. This helps address the fact that when you are delivering to a group of people, you need to manage and provide for a diversity mix of learning styles, ways of thinking, ways of relating, and other unique characteristics.

This relates to the adage ‘in happiness as in cooking, there is a brew of ingredients to suit different tastes.’

Thus mixing up your commentary in what you present and in the way you present helps to meet these unique needs and interests. Mix up facts and figures with stories such as myths and anecdotes or readings from journals and diaries. Try adding a few visual props such as historical photos, maps and artwork. Ask questions – both those you answer and those you do not answer. And try engaging their imagination through sensory and descriptive language. We experience events in life through more than one sense, and so we should aim to do the same when recreating events and/or sharing stories. Sensory language provides us with such an opportunity – for example.

‘... and then they arrived at the Old Church. A church with stained glass windows, typical of the golden windows era.’ (visual)

‘... and then they arrived at an old building with rough sandstone walls and smooth cedar doors. This building was the local Church, and for years its bells would chime on the hour providing people with the only means of keeping time. Light streamed through the stained glass windows in a myriad of colours.’ (visual, auditory, touch)

Fun can be had by mixing and combining words related to different senses and giving rise to phrases called synaesthesias. Some examples include: an illusion of bells ringing in my ears (visual – auditory); a smooth taste (feel – taste); a cool blue colour (feel – visual); a spicy glance (taste – visual); frustrated me with his sloppy speech (feel – auditory). We could add auditory variety by blending loud sounding words such as thunder and scream with soft words such as whisper and patter. Or incorporate onomatopoeia (sound device) with words such as ‘plonk’, ‘splish’, ‘splat’.

You can also extend on the use of sensory words by incorporating descriptive verbs. For example, if describing the movement of a person try to capture the essence of that movement – in place of walk we could use stumble, stroked, ambled – rather than run we could use sprint, skip. We could bring in fast-sounding words such as ‘flight’ and slower-sounding words such as ‘meander’ or ‘drift’. By changing just one word in the following lines, I would feel reasonably confident that your imagination creates a unique image each time:

The Old Man strolled down the laneway
The Old Man skipped down the laneway
The Old Man swaggered down the laneway

**The colour and richness we find when playing with perceptions**

Research indicates that we can receive anything up to 10,000,000 bytes of information per second. We can not process such vast amounts of information and so a percentage is ignored or simply deleted from our processing efforts. This same dilemma provides opportunities when we encourage our conscious effort to become more aware of our environment.
This relates to a concept called perception layering, which promotes the idea that any point in time and space has a multitude of dimensions - it just depends on your perception. For example, if you were to deliver a 30-minute presentation on a building you could focus on any one or more of the following possible angles:

- History of this type of building
- Style of this building
- People who have lived in the building
- Materials used in its construction
- Habitats provided by the building

When we ‘stretch the moment’ and explore a particular subject area we can then increase the potential perspectives we can work with. The challenge is in being able to ‘stretch the moment’. Somebody once said: ‘We do not need to change what we see, only the way we see it.’

Having fun and enjoying yourself

I was driving down Crown Street (Sydney) late one night and was stopped by a set of red lights at the William Street intersection. It didn’t take long before my eyes started scanning the landscape trying to keep busy whilst waiting for a change of lights. At that moment I noticed a little poster on the window of a local Gym. It read: ‘What we learn with pleasure we rarely forget.’ How true! In the main people love to have fun and enjoy themselves. In the majority of cases they are in leisure mode when taking part in an interpretive activity, and whilst they want to learn they want that learning experience to be fun. This does not mean you need to crack a joke every ten minutes, but simply that you have a sense of humour (jokes and humour are not necessarily the same) and enjoy what you are doing with an enthusiasm that can be contagious. For if you’re not enjoying the experience, it’s going to be that little bit harder to evoke a sense of enjoyment from any group of visitors you might be working with.

A wrap!

So a bit of a summary on some of the ways in which interpretation and stories help to enrich the experience of visitors:

- People, Places and Things
- Bring movement and purpose to your activity by following a theme / storyline
- Enrich the moments of your visitors experience
- Encourage us to have fun and enjoy ourselves

A little ditty to leave you with:

People might forget what you said
People might forget what you did
But people will rarely forget the experiences, feelings and emotions you helped evoke.

Contacting the Interpretation Australia Association: www.interpretationaustralia.asn.au