

# A New Interpretive Pedagogy

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## **Abstract**

One of the most prominent debates related to interpretation lies in the approach that this informal education process takes—in essence its pedagogy. At its core, personal interpretation's goal is to make the visit a memorable and meaningful encounter. It is an approach that if done properly, may be difficult to master, but one, that ultimately would increase the “success” of interpretation and improve its perception among those in the field as well as those outside the profession. This paper proposes a new pedagogic approach that focuses on the visitor more than the interpretive program. The more that can be learned about the constituents increases the ability to offer information that correlates to their lives and has far more potential to result in long-term impacts desired by our field. The notion of this new interpretation is to devote time and effort in the interpretive experience to learning who the visitor is and with that information, offer a message that would best resonate with participants.

## **Keywords**

interpretation, pedagogy, training

## A New Interpretive Pedagogy

The National Park Service's interpretive approach has tended to focus on fixed and final conclusions or "themes" that are supposed to guide interpretation over the long term. This approach has artificially sequestered interpretation from the original open-ended experiences of historical actors, from dynamic, ongoing patterns of scholarship, and from engaging visitors with flexible, multiple perspectives on interpretation.... These dynamics predispose NPS to underestimate visitors and view them as people to be instructed rather than listened to and engaged. (*Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*, 2011, p. 106)

The observations noted by the Organization of American Historians are directed toward historical interpretation. However, the "instructed" rather than "engaged" approach has been observed in a variety of studies conducted by this author (Knapp, 2007) that represented both cultural and environmental interpretation. Specifically, the interpreter offers messages to the visitor with no attempt at receiving responses from the participants. In observed walks, campfire programs, and presentations, visitors had few opportunities to offer their own responses to interpretive messages. In virtually all of the observed programs the interpreter would interchange briefly with the visitors prior to the start of the program but when the interpretive program actually began, dialogue with the visitors generally ended, establishing a *one-way* form of communication. The lack of a *two-way dialogue* limited the actual knowledge the interpreter could have regarding his/her audience (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and/or physical state at the time of the interpretive experience) debilitating the chances for visitor connections desired by the field.

A recommendation for the interpretive field is to look closer at constructivist learning that promotes interactions between the learner and teacher, or in this case, the interpreter and the participant. A major theme in the constructivist framework developed by Bruner (1966) is that learning is an active process in which learners (in this case the visitor) construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current/past knowledge. The learner selects and transforms information, constructs hypotheses, and makes decisions, relying on a cognitive structure to do so. The interpreter and visitor would therefore engage in an active dialogue (i.e., Socratic learning) with the interpreter presenting information that matches with the visitor's current state of understanding.

An important principle of a constructivist approach is the notion that the educator, at times, takes on a facilitation role. Learning occurs through interactions with the environment and is mediated by the educator. In essence, constructive learning would be enhanced through interpreter-led discussions and dialogue with the participants and not at the group. Therefore, an interpretive experience should include input from the visitors throughout the program. This, in sum, marks the difference between a one-way and two-way approach to promoting meaningful connections.

### A Dialogic Approach to Interpretation

Therefore, the authors offer a new pedagogy for interpretation that would emphasize a two-way approach to interpretation. An interpretive approach that is based on real-world experiences, connects to everyday life, and offers active delivery of the content. This

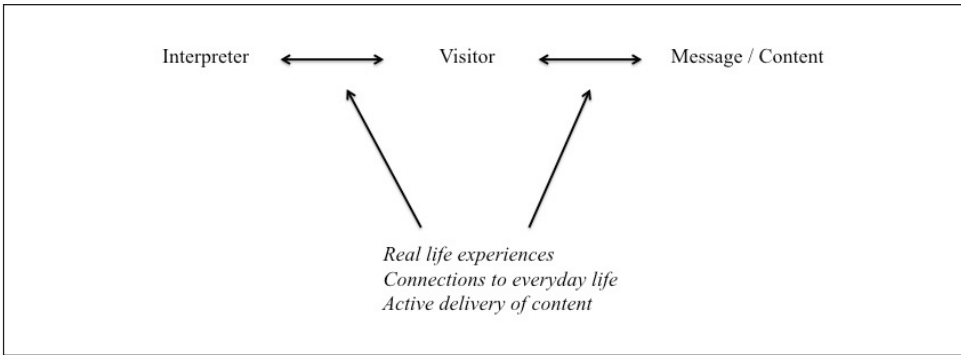


Figure 1

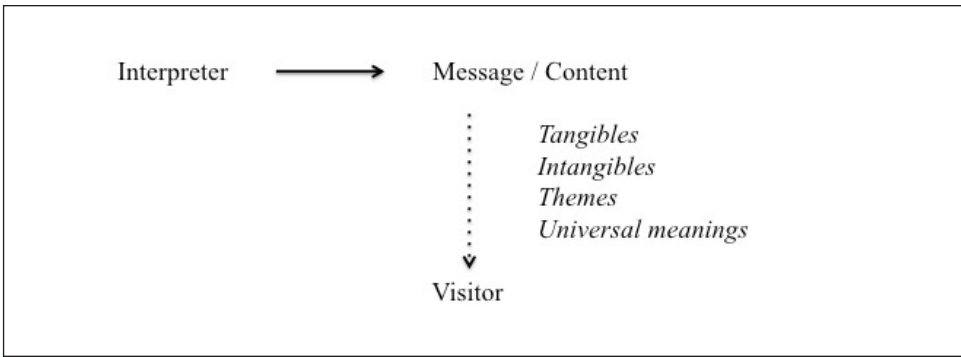


Figure 2

approach would place visitors first, with content delivered only after on-site assessment of the participants has been accomplished. In essence, this new pedagogy calls for active dialogue between the interpreter and visitors.

In a dialogic approach, the interpreter is aware of the visitors and the place in which they have gathered. The visitors are no longer seen as vessels to be filled with information or individuals not yet connected to resources. The respectful relationship between interpreter and visitors is at the center of the ensuing dialogue. And, as the authors posit, the resources must be approached through the visitors for a meaningful and memorable dialogue to occur. In essence, the interpreter must “go through” the visitors before he or she can fully delve into the content. (See Figure 1.) Hence, visitor information must be attained and then assimilated into the message. This process differs dramatically from traditional interpretation in that the latter relies on the content and its varying degrees of symbolism and meanings to connect with visitors with little or no direct orientation of the participants. (See Figure 2.)

The new pedagogy the authors advocate is one in which the interpreter engages in true dialogue with visitors. This approach would reflect six steps facilitated by the interpreter.

**Introduction:** This approach would necessitate a clear and articulate overview of the message/content that the interpreter would like to see covered. This should be brief but to the point with no more than a few main points to avoid overwhelming the visitors with too much information.

**Visitor Orientation:** This phase would involve two primary objectives. First, it would enable individuals to offer their names and hometown information. But, more importantly, enable them to offer any immediate reaction/feedback related to the message/content. This phase would call for fairly close facilitation by the interpreter to avoid lengthy individual introductions by visitors and to encourage all to offer feedback related to the interpretive message. This element of dialogic interpretation would call for the interpreter to have personal communication skills that would enable as many people who want to contribute to do so yet allowing others to feel comfortable about not wanting to be actively involved in the dialogue.

**Connection Assessment:** By far this phase of the dialogue would be the most challenging. However, it would be essential in that it would attempt to make direct connections between the visitors and the message/content. This would occur *internally* through a wide range of approaches. Throughout an interpretive experience, the interpreter is constantly assessing and reassessing the trajectory of the dialogue based on his/her active participation with the visitors as they collectively come to understand the resources through the visitors' knowledge and inquiry.

**Content Delivery:** With the use of one or more of the connection approaches the interpreter would then deliver a clear and concise overview of the message/content. As with any interpretive program, a variety of techniques/styles could and should be used to develop the topic. A dialogic approach may require preparation of interpretive techniques and materials that may or may not be utilized in any given program. This is dependent on the visitors' interests and the ways any given technique can help to develop an associated understanding.

**Visitor Adjustments to Content:** Ample time should be allowed for visitors to ask questions, gain clarification, or attempt to contribute to the content delivered by the interpreter. Facilitation skills would be needed to assure all questions are answered or at least addressed.

**Final Articulation of Content:** This element would give the opportunity for the interpreter to summarize key points brought up in the dialogue. More importantly, it would give the interpreter the final opportunity to summarize key points related to the message/content delivered. This would ensure specific site goals would be met even if the dialogue had "strayed" from the main points.

The six phases of this dialogic interpretive process would call on an interpreter to possess the following skills/elements:

<i>Presence</i>	being genuine and fully engaged in the specific interaction taking place
<i>Openness</i>	recognizing and accepting the genuine being of the other person and understanding that the other is fundamentally different from oneself
<i>Emergence</i>	understanding that the process and outcomes of dialogue are not predetermined
<i>Extraverted</i>	marked by interest in and behavior directed toward others or the environment as opposed to or to the exclusion of self
<i>Knowledgeable</i>	well informed regarding the resource site and the messages/content offered to the visitors.

The element of emergence can be particularly troublesome to interpreters schooled in the didactic, one-way approach to interpretation. Not knowing a specific trajectory for a program can be disorienting and can be seen by some untrained practitioners as a process that lacks guidance and control. Enos Mills offers some sage advice regarding emergence in one of his early 20th-century essays. In “A Day with a Nature Guide,” originally published in *The Outlook*, he describes the interaction of a nature guide and a small group of visitors to the Long’s Peak area of Colorado. His description is the embodiment of the notion of emergence.

Each member of the party remembered something of plant distribution and each contributed something to the discussion concerning plant zones, slope exposure, temperature, and moisture—the determinism of ecological influences.... This party being interested in the distribution of plant and animal life, and in erosion, the guide made these the features of the day’s excursion. (Mills, 1990, p. 126)

## Conclusion

Dialogue-based interpretation is, indeed, much less presentational than the traditional offerings. It is more about the visitors and their interaction with the protected resources than it is about the planned presentation of the interpreter. It attempts to veer programs from didactic one-way presentations to active two-way communication between the visitors and the interpretive message. This approach is more complex and challenging but would certainly increase the potential for the visitors to make direct connections and therefore have lasting memories of their interpretive experience.

Describing European tour guides in his book *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims’ Progress* (2003), Mark Twain offered an incisive and instructive indictment of interpreters. We argue that in taking Twain’s insights to heart we can find the inspiration to engage in a new dialogic pedagogy.

They talk forever and forever and that is the kind of billingsgate they use. Inspiration itself could hardly comprehend them. If they would only show you a masterpiece of art, or a venerable tomb, or a prison-house, or a battle-

field, hallowed by touching memories or historical reminiscences, or grand traditions, and then step aside and hold still for ten minutes and let you think, it would not be so bad. (p. 127)

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