

Tradition and Transition: A Discussion of Evolving Interpretive Concepts--2017

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The *Foundations of 21st Century Interpretation* document focuses on the evolution of interpretive concepts and the skills and abilities (competencies) an interpreter should strive to develop. Interpreters who have practiced the craft for a while will recognize many time-honored concepts, and find others strengthened, transformed, or shifted. This document aims to provide a reference for interpreters to identify familiar concepts within the new document. It also aspires to provoke discussion within the field about how these ideas are evolving with time, global trends, research, and engagement with our audiences.

Below you'll find a chart with three columns - on the left are familiar interpretive concepts like "interpretive themes" or "knowledge of the resource." In the center column, you'll find quotes from the new Foundations document that reference the concept, and page numbers where you can find each reference. In some cases, the language will be the same, in others, it may have shifted or transformed. In the third column, you'll find a discussion of how this idea has morphed (if at all). These discussion sections are the work of individual interpreters, collaborating with a larger cohort of their peers, trying to capture trends, evolution, or nuance within the concept. In the spirit of 21st Century interpretation, these discussions aren't intended to be read as authoritative, but rather as starting points for consideration and further discussion among practitioners of our craft.

In fact, the *Foundations of 21st Century Interpretation* document is meant to be a living text - undergoing periodic revision based on calibration and feedback from the field. As you experiment with embodying these interpretive concepts through programs and media products, bring your thoughts to discussion groups on the [Common Learning Portal](#), and contribute to the ongoing evolution of the document and the field of interpretation.

The concept...	Where do I find it in Foundations of 21st Century Interpretation?	Discussion...
Tangibles, Intangibles and Universal Concepts	Tangibles are referred to as natural/cultural "resources". Intangibles and universal concepts are primarily referred to as "meanings", "values",	<i>"These resources represent who we are as a society, what we value, where we have been, and - most importantly - where we can go."</i> p.2

	<p>and “significance”. These terms appear in many places in the document. The specific references in the following sections may prove helpful. See:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • p. 2, Evolving Interpretive Principles: “Effective interpretation enriches and enhances people’s lives through interactions with natural and cultural resources. It invites them to explore personal meanings within a resource so they are more apt to care about and for it. Interpretation also seeks to extend the meanings of local site or resource to broader human and natural contexts.” • p. 6, Investigating Site Resources and Evolving Context: “They continuously explore the depth and breadth of evolving meanings within a site. They investigate the many facets of resource knowledge, including the associated relationship, systems, processes, human values, historical and modern perspectives, and alternate intangible meanings.” 	<p>While not called out specifically in the document, tangibles, intangibles, and universal concepts continue to be key when developing interpretive products.</p> <p><i>“Effective interpretation enriches and enhances people’s lives through interactions with natural and cultural resources.”</i> The tangible resource(s) is central to the experience, which is further supported by the competency <i>Investigating Site Resources And Evolving Context</i>.</p> <p>Interpreters craft experiences to surface the <i>evolving meanings</i> of the tangible resources. Audiences are invited to explore the contemporary significance of a site and/or resource. These meanings and significance are the intangibles and universal concepts tied to that resource and site.</p> <p>Respecting that everyone can relate to universal concepts but no two people will see them exactly the same way, interpretation continues to value multiple perspectives in understanding our resources and sites.</p>
<p>Opportunities for Intellectual and Emotional Connections</p>	<p>This hasn’t changed much. See:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • p. 3 “Create, facilitate, and support opportunities for audiences to make their own intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings and current contexts.” • p. 8 “The design of an interpretive experience includes purposeful selection and integration of techniques in order to: facilitate opportunities for both intellectual emotional connections to resource meanings.” 	<p>This concept remains much as it ever has been - an acknowledgement that humans both think and feel, and that quality interpretive programs will inspire them to do both. This remains a foundational expectation for our work.</p>

<p>Relevance / Significance</p>	<p>This has not changed a great deal. However, in addition to personal relevance, there is even more emphasis on the evolving relevance of site resources in today's society. See:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • p. 2 “The reach of interpretation stretches beyond physical boundaries and strict reading of enabling legislation, exploring a resource’s contemporary significance and the perspectives of diverse audiences, thereby helping people view historical, cultural and environmental legacies as ever-evolving.” • p. 5 “All interpreters and educators: Interact and collaborate with diverse audiences, stakeholders, communities and cultures to broaden awareness of the evolving meanings and relevance of park resources.” • p. 7 “Effective interpretation explores controversial and complex issues as a means of finding natural and cultural resources’ evolving relevance in today’s community.” 	<p><i>“Interpretation also explores the changing nature of truth and meaning. It analyzes past actions and considers modern relevancies.”</i> p. 2</p> <p>While interpretation continues to explore the relevance and significance of resources and sites, the new Foundations really focus on the need to honor and incorporate multiple truths about that resource/site. In a way, this is an extension of the concept of multiple perspectives, taking a deeper look at the complex nature of the relevance and meaning of our diverse sites and resources.</p>
<p>Interpretive theme</p>	<p>Now it’s called “relevant ideas and essential questions.” See:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This whole competency - Exploring <i>Relevant Ideas and Essential Questions</i> (p. 7) • p. 3, Evolving Interpretive Principles: “All interpreters and educators focus programs/products around resource-based, audience-<i>relevant ideas and essential questions.</i>” • p. 8 Integrating Engagement Techniques: “The design of an interpretive experience 	<p><i>“A cohesive experience for the audience is achieved by exploring an essential question or relevant idea supported by a purposeful interpretive framework.”</i> p.7</p> <p>An “interpretive theme” is a statement of resource meaning. It might be inclusive and represent multiple perspectives or it might not. In order to make sure we embrace the many meanings that audiences might ascribe to a particular resource, this concept has shifted to “relevant ideas and essential questions.”</p> <p>Essential questions are crafted to explore the meaning</p>

	<p>includes purposeful selection and engagement of techniques in order to support the exploration of <i>relevant ideas and essential questions.</i>”</p>	<p>behind a resource, inviting multiple voices to participate in that exploration through the interpretive program or product.</p> <p>Relevant ideas connect resource meanings to what matters to our audiences today. More than one relevant idea may occur in an interpretive program or product. The interpreter may plan to present one or more relevant ideas, and should invite the audience to share relevant ideas as well.</p> <p>Unlike a theme, which an interpreter chooses and uses in each instance of a program, different relevant ideas may surface within each group that experiences an interpretive product.</p>
<p>Cohesive Development of a Relevant Idea</p>	<p>As before, there is an emphasis on developing focus and cohesion in programs. See:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● p. 3 “All interpreters and educators: Focus programs/products around resource-based, audience-relevant ideas and essential questions.” ● p. 7 “All interpreters and Educators: Design interpretive experience with purposeful focus and cohesion which address product goals.” ● p.8 “The design of an interpretive experience includes purposeful selection and integration of techniques in order to: facilitate opportunities for both intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings; support the exploration of relevant ideas and essential questions; [and] build civic skills.” 	<p>“A <i>cohesive experience for the audience is achieved by exploring an essential question or relevant idea supported by a purposeful interpretive framework.</i>” p. 7</p> <p>A question many interpreters raise while learning facilitated dialogue or other audience-centered engagement techniques is, “Does the cohesive development of a program necessarily drop away when we start structuring programs that are more audience-centered? The answer is, “no!”</p> <p>Developing audience-centered programs that have a clear focus and link together immersive resource experiences, dialogue, and interpretive content in a cohesive way is not at odds with embracing “flexibility, allowing audiences to cooperatively shape interpretive experiences through contribution of content and meanings.” (p. 9)</p> <p>Programs will still be centered on a particular topic or</p>

		<p>issue, as the interpreter and audience members jointly explore the relevant content/resources within that realm. As facilitator, the interpreter can decide to narrowly constrain the focus of the program, or define it broadly, and then help the participants stay within those agreed-upon boundaries.</p>
<p>Knowledge of the Resource</p>	<p>The competency <i>Investigating Site Resources and Evolving Context</i> speaks to the need for interpreters to have broad knowledge of the resource. (p. 8)</p>	<p><i>“An interpreter’s knowledge of the resource is not limited by time period, enabling legislation, or geographic scope. It is enriched by a site’s evolving historical, scientific and social contexts, including how preservation and resource management may have changed it.” p. 6</i></p> <p>Understanding the resource is a key component of developing interpretive products. Interpreters “actively pursue resource knowledge from a variety of sources, including personal exploration, site immersion, artifacts, primary documents, resource experts, researchers, community partners, the internet, social media and park audiences.”</p> <p>It’s important for interpreters to recognize the multiple truths (p. 8) about their resource that come from audience members having different experiences and perspectives. This will lead to more inclusive, engaging, and transparent interpretive opportunities that will help surface the relevancy of park resources in today’s world. This will in turn help the interpretive product meet the threefold goals of interpretation (p. 4).</p>
<p>Knowledge of the Audience</p>	<p>A shift towards audience-centeredness is one of the hallmarks of the new Foundations for 21st Century Interpretation. For insight into this focus, see:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The competency - <i>Building Relationships with Audience and Community</i> (p.5) 	<p><i>“Active engagement with audiences allows their input to guide meaning-making experiences.”</i></p> <p>Acquiring <i>Knowledge of the Audience</i> still involves studying, “a wide variety of social science data and other resources to continue learning about audience</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • p. 3 “Incorporate audience-centered techniques into all types of interpretive products and activities which invite and encourage interaction, collaboration and contribution.” <p>Knowledge of the audience now includes a new dimension, in which the interpreter must be aware of how audience members are interacting with each other. See</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • p. 4, “Facilitating social interactions involves...reading emotional, behavioral and social cues to help people engage and interact respectfully, even when they disagree.” <p>Finally, the concept of “Knowledge of the Audience” embraces not just the visitors in front of you or those having a virtual experience, but those who have yet to be reached. See:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • p.9 “The planning and design process for all programs/products involves a thoughtful and purposeful consideration of: potential audiences -- Reaching beyond people already served by the park, interpreters consider visitors who are likely to participate and specifically target audiences that are new or underserved.” 	<p>demographics, needs, expectations and trends.” Yet there is an increased emphasis on “interact[ing] and collaborat[ing] with diverse audiences, stakeholders, communities and cultures,” in order to cultivate that knowledge directly from the audiences themselves.</p> <p>With an increased focus on audience-centered engagement techniques, the interpreter is going to get to know their audience through the facilitation of interpretive programs. Knowing your audience is not simply a matter of doing your demographic homework before the program. Individual and social truths will surface during programs, and through repetition inform the interpreter about who their audience is.</p> <p><i>Knowledge of the Audience</i> isn’t just about getting to know the people in front of you (where they are from, whether they’ve been to the park before, what they do for a living), but trying to get at what they know about the resources, and what they are seeking from the park and the interpretive program.</p> <p>There is also a new emphasis on gaining knowledge about how different audience members will engage with each other. As a facilitator, the interpreter must help participants maintain safety during the program, and structure opportunities for individuals to listen to and learn from each other. This is “Knowledge of the Audience’s Interactions.”</p>
Appropriate Techniques	<p>There is even more focus on facilitating audience interaction not just with the resource, but with each other. See the competency <i>Integrating Engagement Techniques</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P. 8 “All interpreters and educators: integrate engagement techniques to 	<p><i>“The primary purpose of engagement techniques is to provide opportunities for audience co-creation of content and discovery of meanings, and prompts exploration of multiple perspectives.” p. 8</i></p> <p>Interpreters continue to use a variety of techniques that</p>

	<p>facilitate opportunities for connections, contribution, and co-creation.”</p>	<p>provide opportunities for the audience to engage with the resource (resource immersion). However, interpretive techniques should also provide opportunities for the audience to “guide the direction of the encounter”, allowing for audience to collaborate and contribute to the experience by sharing their own interests and perspectives. This helps the participants “build civic skills” by engaging with each other while engaging with the resource.</p> <p>As interpreters incorporate engagement techniques into their interpretive products, they should take risks and be willing to fail in order to learn and improve in the future. Evaluation and feedback are critical to this process.</p>
<p>Resource Immersion</p>	<p>NPS Interpretation remains unwaveringly focused on resource immersion. See:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● p.7 “Use site resources as catalysts to explore and investigate questions and ideas essential to today’s society.” ● P. 8 “Interpretive techniques facilitate audience interaction with each other and the resource.” ● P. 8 “Interpreters integrate techniques which help the audience engage with the resource.” <p>Also as before, resource immersion is not just for the visitor, but also for the interpreter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● p. 6 “Actively pursue resource knowledge from a variety of sources, including personal exploration, site immersion, artifacts, primary documents, resource experts, [etc.]” 	<p><i>“Whether on-site, off-site or virtual, the resource is central to the interpretive experience.” p.8</i></p> <p>Audience-centered engagement techniques thrive when practiced out among a park’s natural or cultural resources, because they invite direct visitor engagement with those resources.</p> <p>In fact, the visitors themselves become a resource within the immersive experience - each a unique entity, situated in place, with whom connections can be made and meanings explored.</p> <p>When the interpreter, “invite[s] collaborative learning about, with and among audiences through a range of opportunities,” (p. 7) within the resource, learning and connections can be forged by all.</p>

