

Food for Thought: Historical Interpretation as Teaching

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Good history teachers take their students beyond a surface knowledge of a subject and help them develop a deeper understanding they can apply in other situations and build on in the future. Good historical interpretation aims for the same goals. Understanding interpretation as teaching, based on the varied backgrounds and psychological needs that visitors bring to our sites can help us plan for visitor experiences that will be truly memorable, useful, and inspiring. As a result of high quality interpretation, visitors gain understandings that become the basis for additional learning after they leave, and hopefully inspire them to return to our sites for more learning opportunities.

This outline summarizes lessons learned from 40 years of teaching junior high and high school history in public and private schools and over 25 years of volunteering as an interpreter for visitors of all ages and backgrounds at Howell Farm. The combination of teaching and interpreting has been symbiotic and I feel I have been a better teacher because of experiences and insights gained interpreting at a living history farm and I have been a better interpreter because of experiences and insights gained through teaching in a school setting.

Basic Premise

Both classroom history teachers and interpreters at historic sites are in the business of teaching history.

There are a number of similarities between the two settings:

Neither a teacher nor an interpreter can accomplish everything that they would like to. Both must work within time constraints.

Because time is limited, before planning lessons or programs, both history teachers and historical interpreters must carefully determine what is essential for the student/visitor to learn in the time available. Every teacher/interpreter needs to understand whether their main objective – derived from their employer or themselves – is to “cover” a quantity of material or to instill a love of history and learning about it?

There are two actors influencing learning in a classroom or at an historic site – the teacher/interpreter and the student/visitor. Not much learning takes place if only one actor is active and the other is passive.

Neither historical interpreters nor classroom teachers should view what they do as an isolated end in itself, but as elements in the life-long learning process of students/visitors.

Both teachers and interpreters have the same basic tool box to draw from as they consider their audience and what will give them an enjoyable, rewarding, and satisfying experience. The assumptions you make about your audience will drive how you present your program and which tools you will use in various combinations. The tools include:

Written materials that visitors read

Verbal presentations that visitors listen to

Visual objects such as buildings, artifacts, animals, etc. that visitors look at

Hands-on activities that visitors can engage in physically

All these tools are useful, but finding the right mix for a particular audience is the trick. No tool should be used just because it is felt to be “a good technique” – such as a hands-on activity – it has to help achieve your goal or it is worthless.

However, there are some important differences:

Schools should make history interesting, rewarding, and enjoyable – historic sites must make it so in order to thrive.

Historic sites have fewer good opportunities to find out just what was learned and retained by visitors because there is no follow-up test and there are few, if any, opportunities to follow-up with visitors. (However, I would also say that teachers seldom know just what students have learned even though they do test. Tests reflect only a portion of what was important to the teacher rather than what was important to the student.)

Historic sites must rely on visitor satisfaction through intrinsic rewards while teachers can utilize both intrinsic and extrinsic, and usually have the extrinsic reward of grades to fall back on. A student is required in some way to at least appear to learn history in school while no such requirement exists at an historic site for the average recreational visitor. However, students may gain an extrinsic reward when they learn something at an historic site that relates to their curriculum needs.

What I have learned from both teaching and interpreting

Too many teachers/interpreters are hired because they can “tell the story” rather than because they truly want to stretch their student/visitor’s knowledge base, develop skills, and inspire students/visitors – and – because they want to continue learning themselves.

The school/historic site does not exist to provide something enjoyable for the teacher/interpreter – it exists for the benefit of the student/visitor.

Both teachers and interpreters need to understand that learning history is a journey and not a destination. The subject matter in a classroom or the interpretation at an historic site is never going to be complete and definitive – new understandings are constantly being developed. We should not be concerned about passing on erroneous information, myth, etc. except if it is presented as absolute truth. All information should be presented as representing the current understanding and the current understanding should always be challenged.

Students in class or visitors to an historic site learn something every class/visit – but we can’t always control what a student/visitor learns.

In every class or group of visitors, every student/visitor is learning something slightly different based on their individual experiences and interests, both previous to and during their visit.

Just because students/visitors read something, observe something, or hear me say something doesn’t mean everyone—or anyone—will remember it or be able to combine it with previous knowledge.

Every piece of information has more or less importance to the teacher/interpreter – and to the students/visitors. Some things are merely interesting to know – some are essential to know (and this may vary from person to person)

Active mental or physical involvement increases learning and enjoyment of learning for students/visitors.

As a teacher/interpreter I have a responsibility to be enthusiastic and accepting of where each student/visitor is in terms of interests, background knowledge, etc.

As a teacher/interpreter I can't expect more of my students/visitors than I do of myself. If I want them to be excited, I better be excited.

As a teacher/interpreter I need to model how to learn and value learning for my students/visitors.

As a teacher/interpreter I have a mixed captive and volunteer audience and everyone deserves to have their time valued and used productively.

Voluntary audience = those who come because of some curiosity or something they look forward to

Captive audience = those who come in a school group or who are dragged by parents or the kids.

All audiences are diverse in various ways – age, previous experience and learning, attention span, etc.

We need to be able to approach each audience with differentiation in mind and adapt whatever we do to our current audience.

All audiences have the same basic needs

Affirmation

I am accepted and acceptable at this historic site – they want me here – whatever my age, gender, ethnicity, physical abilities, education level, etc.

I am safe at this historic site just as I am – regardless of age or physical condition

People listen to me at this historic site – they want to hear from me

People know how I am reacting to my experiences at this historic site and it matters to them – they pick up on my confusions, misunderstandings, interests, etc.

My interests and perspectives are acknowledged and acted on at this historic site

People at this historic site believe I am capable of learning something – no matter my age, previous knowledge, native language, etc.

Contribution

My being at this historic site makes a difference to this place – they expect to learn something from me as a visitor so they can keep improving their program

I bring abilities and perspectives to this historic site that are unique

I help others learn at this historic site – in many ways, but especially through my questions

I am connected with others at this historic site through working on something in common – we are all learning something here

Power

What I learn at this historic site is useful to me now and in the future – the people at the site make it clear why what I learn here is important in helping me grow as a person

I can make choices at this historic site that will contribute to my learning – I am not just subjected to a canned tour or speech, there are options

I understand how this historic site operates and what is expected of me – through any signage and human contact I understand what to do seamlessly

There is dependable support for me at this historic site on my journey to new or greater understanding – I have confidence in the interpreters and other staff members

Purpose

I understand why this historic site exists and its significance

What I learn at this historic site reflects me and my world – this place helps me connect with the past and the culture that has directed my life

What I do at this historic site absorbs me – I have many opportunities to think and reflect and make the offerings of this site an integral part of myself

Challenge

Learning at this historic site complements my abilities

Learning at this historic site stretches me

I can learn a lot at this historic site

I often accomplish things at this historic site I didn't believe were possible

Study Your Audience at Three Stages of Its Visit

Before the Visit – to the extent possible

Age level

Previous experiences

How your program fits into curriculum (School groups) or previous experience -visits

Desires – what they expect

Special needs

During the Visit

How is the presentation/activity being received?

Do adjustments need to be made?

How are things flowing in terms of time, congestion, etc.?

Am I seeing interest or boredom?

Am I getting questions? – directly on topic? – on related topics?

What do these tell me about the interests of the audience?

After the Visit - Questions to ask whenever possible:

What was the most interesting thing you learned?

What was the most important thing you learned?

What do you want to learn more about after you leave?

What did we do that makes you want to come back?

Did we do anything that makes you want to avoid coming back?

To sum up my beliefs about interpreting as teaching

No visitor can – or should - be expected to learn everything possible in just one visit

Nurturing a curiosity in your visitor is far more important than giving facts

Learning is a journey – not a destination

Different visitors have different needs and will respond to different approaches

Different visitors and different learning situations require different “tools”

Hands-on activities provide a number of “tools” you can use –along with verbal and visual information

Active involvement, mentally or physically, leads to greater and more satisfying learning – at any age

Nothing should be done just because it is felt to be “a good technique” – such as a hands-on activity – it has to help achieve your goal

Resources to learn more about planning for real understanding and diverse audiences. While these are aimed at classroom teachers, the information and especially the planning procedures are very applicable to historic site interpretation.

Tomlinson, Carol Ann. *The Differentiated Classroom*. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, 1999. Also see: caroltomlinson.com

Wiggins, Grant and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*. Pearson, 2005.
Also see: authenticeducation.org