The Interpretive Process Model

➢ The Interpretive Process Model helps interpreters create all types of interpretive products that connect audiences to the meanings of a place, object, event, or person.

➢ The Interpretive Process Model furnishes a sequence of activities with which an interpreter can:

- develop opportunities for their audiences to make emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource
- cohesively develop an idea or ideas that are relevant to the resource and the audience.

➢ The Interpretive Process Model focuses on elements that make a product interpretive. Effective interpretive products also require accurate information and skillful delivery.

➢ The Interpretive Process Model is based on the principles of Module 101 of the Interpretive Development Curriculum, which can be found on the web at *www.nps.gov/idp/interp*.

The Interpretive Process Model

1. Select a tangible place, object, person, or event that you want the audience to care about.

2. Identify intangible meanings.

3. Identify universal concepts.

4. Identify audience.

5. Write a theme statement—include a universal concept.

6. Use interpretive methods to develop links into opportunities for connections to meanings. Illustrate the theme statement.

7. Use theme statement to organize opportunities for connections and cohesively develop an idea or ideas.

> # 1. Select a tangible place, object, person, or event that you want the audience to care about.
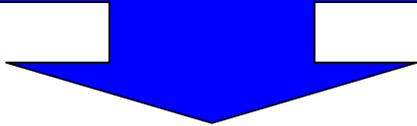
Discussion

Tangible resources can be objects, places, people, or events. Resource professionals seek to preserve, conserve, and remember tangible resources. Tangible resources include events (historical and natural) and people from the past.

An interpretive product or service may provoke the audience to care about more than one tangible resource. A program might focus on a single plant but intend for the audience to also care about the species, place, and ecosystem. Similarly, an interpreter might use a specific artifact to represent the material culture of a particular time and the people who created and used it.

While an interpretive product or service may include several tangible resources, there is usually one tangible resource that acts as an icon or symbol. The icon is the engine that powers the presentation. It's an anchor that capture and reveals a constellation of ideas, values, relationships, context, systems, and process. The icon provides a starting point and reference for an exploration of associated tangible resources and multiple resource meanings.

An interpretive product or service might use more than one tangible resource as an icon. An interpretive tour usually focuses on a different object or feature at each stop to explore a unique meaning or meanings. Sometimes an essay or talk uses two or more icons to describe multiple perspectives regarding the same topic. The more icons an interpretive product uses, however, the more complicated the development and delivery will be.

2. Identify intangible meanings.

What can you interpret with this tangible resource? What processes, ideas, relationships, concepts, and values might it meaningfully represent? Brainstorm all the possible intangible meanings that can be associated with it. These meanings, connected with the tangible resource, are its tangible/intangible links. Your list of links should be long. Do you have enough Knowledge of the Resource (KR)? Do you need to do more research? Have you considered multiple perspectives and interests? Ask others to add to your list.
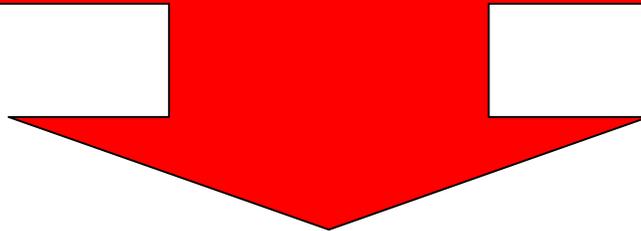
Considered only in terms of its physical attributes a tangible resource has limited significance. Without the stories that go with it, the Liberty Bell is a cracked piece of metal with almost no value. Without the meanings of beauty, life, and the forest ecosystem, a tree might only be measured in board-feet. However, when a tangible is linked to broader intangible meanings its value becomes relevant to more people—its importance more apparent and accessible.

Each tangible resource has an incredible variety of intangible meanings. Those meanings can be obvious and popular or obscure and controversial. The more Knowledge of the Resource (KR) and Knowledge of the Audience (KA) an interpreter has, the more meanings can be linked to the tangible.

Tangible/intangible links are the basic building blocks of interpretation. Audiences wish to connect personally to the subject and/or resource. Sometimes this occurs through their understanding of context, insight, discovery, revelation—the intellectual. Other times it comes through the emotions—enjoyment, sensation, spirit, renewal, empathy, wonder, challenge. Connecting experiences occur when the tangible resource is linked to some larger intangible meaning in a way that the audience can relate to and that provokes understanding and/or appreciation. Intangible meanings speak to different people in different ways. Only when the tangible/intangible link is personally relevant does an individual connect to the resource.

3. Identify universal concepts.

Are any of your intangibles universal concepts—a concept that everyone can relate to, but no two people will see exactly the same way? Some of the intangibles on your list should be universal concepts because they provide the maximum amount of relevance to the widest audience.

Universal concepts are intangible meanings that are relevant to almost everybody. They are powerful vehicles that reach many people in significant ways.

Like all intangible meanings, universal concepts can be linked to a tangible resource. However, if presented by themselves, universal concepts can be abstract and too abrupt to help the audience make personal connections to the meanings of the resource.

Links that include a universal concept tend to work best when presented with other tangible/intangible links. For example, a program that proclaims the power of water without explaining the process of erosion might seem odd to the audience. But if the program describes and uses erosion as evidence for the power of water to effect change (power and change are universal concepts), both erosion and the power of water might become more compelling. Similarly, standing in The Bloody Lane at Antietam National Battlefield and only speaking of death and bravery could seem disconnected to those unfamiliar with the Civil War. However, a description of the events that occurred there, the ways in which officers and soldiers maneuvered, stumbled, and fought—the significance of their equipment and technology to the results of the encounter might make more powerful impressions of both the tactics and the horror of war.

Universal concepts, joined with other tangible/intangible links can provoke a desire to understand and appreciate intangible meanings that might otherwise seem uninteresting.

4. Identify audience.

Who is your intended audience? What does your tangible mean to different segments of your audience? Do you have enough Knowledge of the Audience (KA)?

All audiences who want to visit or read about a site are seeking something of value for themselves. They all expect something special. Each has a personal sense of what the place means. Many know a great deal about the resource, some know what family or friends have told them, and others simply assume the resource contains something worthwhile.

The meanings audiences ascribe to the resource have a great deal to do with the success or failure of interpretation. Expert audiences require different approaches than general audiences as do children, seniors, or international visitors. Of course, a given interpretive product can be required to meet any combination of those audiences as well as many more.

Some sites have formal visitor surveys and demographic information available. All interpreters, during the casual conversation that often offers itself, can benefit by asking visitors what the resource means to them. A visitor who says the forest is a place for spiritual renewal, solitude, and self-understanding requires a significantly different program than one that feels the forest is a place where they can get bitten by a snake.

Interpreters can gather understanding of audience meanings by asking questions like, "What brought you here today?" "What did you expect to find?" "What do you hope to gain here?" "What do you hope your children will take away with them?" "What do you think about when you look into the canyon?" "If you had my job, what would you tell people?" An interpreter who thinks about and records the answers to these questions has the opportunity to identify tangible resources that address these audience meanings and create interpretive products that use those meanings to provoke new connections to the meanings of the resource.

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5. Write a theme statement—include a universal concept.

Based on your links and KA, write a theme statement that links your tangible to one or more intangible meanings. The most compelling interpretive products have themes that tie a tangible resource to a universal concept.

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Interpretive themes:
- Are single sentences that express meaning;
- Link a tangible resource to its intangible meanings;
- Organize interpretive products;
- Are most powerful when they link a tangible resource to a universal concept.

An effective program has a focus and intends to clearly explore an idea or ideas. Yet successful interpretation occurs when audiences make their own connections to the meanings of the resource. It may seem a contradiction—an interpretive product conveys an idea but the audience should take away their own meanings.

An interpretive theme solves the problem. An interpretive theme is a tool that develops an idea or ideas in order to inspire connections. An interpretive theme is not a message as much as it is a relevant point that encourages new thoughts and feelings. A well-presented program based on a solid interpretive theme will likely provoke connections the interpreter did not anticipate and may never become aware of. No one in the audience may be able to exactly repeat the interpreter's theme but the focus should be clear and most people's versions will be related and recognizable. The theme enables the interpreter to communicate and allows the audience to engage personally based on that communication.

In the past, interpreters and supervisors were advised that the success or failure of an interpretive product could be easily measured by the audience's ability to state the theme. This led to products where the theme was constantly repeated with the hope that the audience would be able to parrot the message. A theme is not a refrain, a sound byte or a "take home message." Products organized in this manner generally fail to cohesively *develop* an idea for the audience over the course of the delivery.

Crafting an interpretive them takes care, time, and editing. It often takes several drafts of both the theme and the product for the interpreter to become clear about what to say and how to say it.

6. Use interpretive methods to develop links into opportunities for connections to meanings. Illustrate the theme statement.

Choose and develop tangible/intangible links that illustrate the idea or ideas expressed in your theme statement into opportunities for connecting the audience to the meanings of the resource. Develop those links with information and interpretive methods such as stories, descriptive language, activities, and illustrations. To be broadly relevant, an interpretive product must provide opportunities for both emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource.
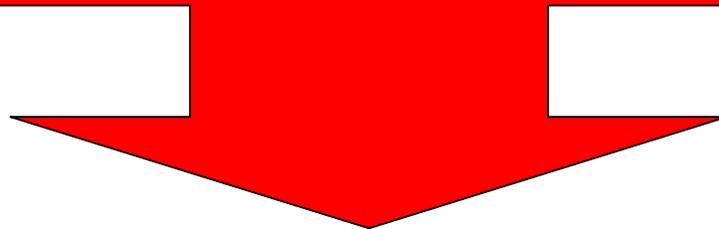
A well-written theme statement allows an interpreter to choose tangible/intangible links that illustrate or express the theme. But by themselves, links don't provide opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource. Links must be developed into opportunities for connections to meanings in order to present the resource in a compelling and evoking way.

There are many ways to develop a link into an opportunity for an emotional or intellectual connection to the meanings of the resource. Success depends on the link, the theme, the interpreter's KR and KA, style, and the purpose of the interpretive product. Stories, explanations, quotes, activities, demonstrations, examples, evidence, illustrations, questions, and discussions are just some of the methods interpreters use.

Sam H. Ham, a noted authority on interpretation, suggests an interpretive product develop no more than five main points.[1] This is probably good advice. Five developed links won't overtax the audience but will provide the interpreter with plenty of material to provide opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource.

Some of the links should be intentionally developed to provide opportunities for emotional connections and some for intellectual connections. An interpreter needs to plan specific opportunities that are intended to inspire or provoke feelings like awe, wonder, sympathy, curiosity, amazement, regret, grief, and anger. Other specific opportunities should provoke insight, understanding of context, discovery, and reveal relationships.

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[1] Sam H. Ham, Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets (Golden, Colorado: North American Press, 1992), 20.

7. Use theme statement to organize opportunities for connections and cohesively develop an idea or ideas.

Use your theme statement to organize the opportunities into a sequence that cohesively develops the relevant idea or ideas stated in the theme. Plan effective transitions to move from one opportunity to another.

The best way to reveal meaning is through the exploration of an idea. To be relevant and provocative an interpretive product must cohesively develop an idea or ideas over the course of its delivery. A meaningful idea captures, organizes, and sustains the attention of the audience. A meaningful idea provides opportunities for audiences to make their own connections to the meanings of the resource. Without the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, products are merely collections of related information or haphazard arrays of tangible/intangible links—they are not interpretive.

Opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource sequenced with effective transitions and arranged to support a well-crafted interpretive theme statement provide the architecture for a cohesively developed idea or ideas.