

Analyze *This!* Analyzing and Measuring Interpretive Effectiveness

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Abstract: *Crazy? Certifiable? Maybe! The NPS Interpretive Analysis Model suggests that we can measure a program or product's potential interpretive effectiveness by a reliable, disciplined and methodical approach. In an age of financial crunch, when every dollar for resource programming is scrutinized, this level of accountability is imperative.*

Keywords: Analysis Model, tangible-intangible links, opportunities for intellectual and emotional connection to resource meanings, relevant idea, cohesive development, interpretive techniques

Recognizing and Measuring Success

Just as we hope that discovering our site's resources is a never-ending journey for our visitors, interpreting those resources is a constant voyage of discovery for us, the interpreters. How do we know if our interpretive efforts are effective? In our profession we have often struggled with articulating what successful interpretation looks like – how do we know it when we see it? How can the foundational philosophical elements of our craft be practically assessed or measured for purposes of our individual development and accountability for overall program effectiveness? If successful interpretation facilitates a connection between the interests/experience of the visitors and the meanings/significance of the resource, then we must be able to assess both *if* the *opportunities* for such connections are provided, and *how* they are facilitated.

The Analysis Model – the model for assessment successfully used by the National Park Service – attempts to measure the *potential* effectiveness of interpretive programs/products by the use of a field-developed, professional definition of what “success” looks like. Interpreters at NPS sites around the country are being trained to be interpretive “analysts” – to be able to consistently identify, articulate and measure the elements of success. These foundational interpretive elements can be commonly defined and understood, and can be planned, applied, recognized and measured.

The Foundation of Analysis

The Analysis Model relies on building a common professional language that enables an effective professional dialogue. Many of the terms/ideas are based on the philosophical underpinnings that have been passed down from Freeman Tilden and other pioneers of our profession. In recent years, we are beginning to see some consistency in our professional dialogue based on the widening use of these terms and ideas. Effective interpretive analysis is dependent on our ability to begin to consistently “speak the same language”, just as other professions do.

Here are some of the key terms/phrases of the language of “success” that can be used in interpretive analysis – based on the NPS national standard for interpretation (core rubric for the peer-review certification program) and the NAI definition of interpretation:

Opportunities
Intellectual and emotional connection
Resource meanings and significance
Cohesive development
Relevant idea

The Discipline of Analysis

Effective analysis requires a disciplined approach. Peer reviewers in the NPS Certification Program are trained to review a program/product based on a “positive assessment” – looking for what’s there, and/or what’s there that could be further developed, rather than focusing on what’s wrong or missing. This approach acknowledges that almost every interpretive effort contains some effective or partially effective elements or ideas. A “positive assessment” minimizes personal bias on the part of the reviewers by acknowledging the individual and creative intent of the interpreter. It also sets a positive tone for encouraging interpreters to scrutinize their own work and engage in collegial discussion of each other’s work.

Another critical discipline of analysis in the NPS Certification Program, is to focus the analysis on the elements of *interpretive* effectiveness, and reserve the monitoring of subject matter content (accuracy, appropriateness, depth of knowledge, etc) and mechanics (voice, volume, pacing, etc) as the responsibility of the park and supervisor. Concentrating on the interpretive elements also helps minimize the reviewers’ personal bias, and makes it possible to focus in a less threatening, non-personal way on the work itself, not the interpreter.

A third, and perhaps most difficult, discipline of analysis is the discipline of articulation – using the professional language, speaking about the program/product rather than the interpreter, using a positive, encouraging tone based on what’s there rather than what’s missing, and speaking to the interpretive elements only. Speaking in this way may not come naturally for many of us, and so requires *practice*.

A Method to the Madness

Effective analysis also seems to work best with a methodical approach. The Analysis Model provides a template for first deconstructing the parts or individual interpretive elements of a product, and then reconstructing them to look at the holistic effect or impact. Isolating individual elements of potential success allows the “analyst”, and ultimately the interpreter, to see how the different parts function within the product. With that understanding, it is easier to step back and look at the interpretive potential of the whole.

The “deconstruction” involves identifying the main tangible resource that is being interpreted, and all of the intangible meanings that are linked to it. Then, only those links that are consciously developed by some interpretive technique, or set of techniques, are identified as providing the opportunities for visitors to make their own connections to resource meanings. Next, there is some analysis of whether those connection opportunities may tend to provoke the intellect (discovery, insight, revelation, comparison, etc) or appeal to the emotions (empathy, concern, awe, wonder, etc).

The “reconstruction” begins by identifying if the product has a clear focus or theme. Does that theme develop a *meaningful* idea about the resource? Is that idea relevant to the audience? How are the connection opportunities arranged to support and cohesively develop this idea? At this point, the

reviewer is prepared to step back and look at the potential interpretive effect or impact of the whole product. It is also useful to compare notes with others, and allow other perspectives to broaden understanding of the product. Then, and only then – after careful consideration of all the interpretive elements that are already there – is the reviewer in an appropriate position to make suggestions for improving the product.

Output vs. Outcome

The Analysis Model allows us to identify the *potential* interpretive effectiveness of any program or product. A program has the best chance to succeed by employing a focused, cohesive construct of tangible-intangible linkages, that are developed by one or more interpretive techniques, to facilitate opportunities for visitors to personally connect – both intellectually and emotionally – to the meanings of the resources being interpreted. These connection opportunities are the output of the interpretive endeavor. Whether or not individual audience members actually *make* connections—the outcome of interpretation – is much harder to determine. This can only really be known through formal audience research, which is critically needed to supplement and verify our internal efforts at self-analysis. However, if our interpretive efforts provide connection *opportunities* for a broad audience, we can know, to a certain degree, that a sense of care and stewardship is much more *likely* to be engendered, and the goal of interpretation is much more *likely* to be fulfilled.

Personal and Professional Accountability

We may all acknowledge that there is no such thing as a perfect program, and that our work can always be improved, but how diligent are we about seeking input? Could we offer something more than personal opinion if asked to validate the potential effectiveness of our work? Professionalism involves constant evaluation, re-evaluation, growth, and improvement. The Analysis Model can be incorporated into training and self-development efforts that any interpreter or supervisor can employ to build individual skills and improve program effectiveness. It can be used as a guide for self-evaluation, as a tool for coaching others, or as a template for group discussion.

On a larger scale, the ability to measure potential interpretive effectiveness provides a level of accountability – that our profession imposes on itself – which gives credibility, reliability and value to our work. This may make a difference when site and agency managers must make difficult budget and programming decisions. The Analysis Model makes it possible to identify specifically what makes a program or product *worth* presenting. It allows us to begin to justify how interpretation facilitates stewardship and preservation in support of site/agency mandates and missions.

Still Crazy After All These Years?

After 17 years as a career interpreter, I've come to realize that it helps to be a little crazy! When I think back to my days coaching seasonal rangers that I trained and supervised back in the 80's, I realize how far we've come as a profession, especially in the last few years. I think of how I struggled back then to articulate what makes effective interpretation. I remember going through the "theme" phase, and the "take-home message" phase. I remember nearly going crazy trying to convince die-hard geologists and historians that their programs needed to go beyond gracing the audience with every fact they knew. I remember being admonished by some interpreters who waved the "interpretation is an art" flag whenever my audits attempted to suggest how their programs could be more organized. And, quite honestly, I remember thinking at every phase, "This is nuts – there's got to be a better way to communicate this"!

I think the Analysis Model provides us with a much better way, based on a professional dialogue and peer review. But I also know that it is not the last and only way. As surely as our profession will continue to grow, so will our ability to identify and articulate the elements of interpretive effectiveness. The Analysis Model can grow and evolve along with our professional understanding. Yes, interpretation *is* an art, but maybe it's not so crazy anymore to think that we can analyze interpretive effectiveness.

“Interpretation is a voyage of discovery in the field of human emotional and intellectual growth, and it's hard to foresee that time when an interpreter can confidently say, ‘Now we are wholly adequate to our task.’” Freeman Tilden

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