

AHI article (Spring 2017)

Reporting Research 3 – Hot interpretation

The concept of 'hot interpretation' was initially introduced back in the 1980s as a way of recognising the need for visitors to engage more fully with the material being presented to them but also to encourage a stronger cognitive and greater affective as well as reflective on-site and post-site experience (Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1998). David Uzzell and Roy Ballantyne defined hot interpretation as 'interpretation that appreciates the need for and injects an affective component into its subject matter' (1998:154). Hot interpretation has been discussed widely in the literature over the last twenty years and is recognised as a valuable approach notably at sites where the content of material being presented is of a controversial, challenging or emotional nature. Typical examples of such locations have been suggested as battlefield sites, castle and jails, places of societal / political protest and/or civil rights development, sites associated with slavery or forced relocation and sites of atrocity. Uzzell and Ballantyne suggest that such locations 'excite a degree of emotional arousal which needs to be recognised and addressed in the interpretation being presented' (1998:152). Thus, the use of hot interpretation can play a key role in conveying the messages, meanings and most importantly perhaps the significance of the material (and the site as a whole) which is being presented to the visitor and upon whom cognition, reaction, reflection and perhaps even a change in attitude might take place.

This relationship between the materials, the site and the encouragement of a cognitive and affective response from the visitors is however not a straight-forward one. The emotional connection to the interpretation will depend upon a number of factors such as: the length of time since the event took place; the location itself (atmosphere and sense of place are viewed as being particularly important); the nature of the material being presented; the way in which the site is managed (notably in terms of remaining physical features, visitor facilities etc.); the types of interpretive media being employed and the nature of any potential personal connection between the site and the visitor (Ham, 2013; Knudson *et al.*, 1995; Uzzell & Ballantyne in Fairclough *et al.*, 2008). This latter is a particularly interesting point because on many sites individuals from history will be identified and their story explained as a means of engaging with, and making potential connections for, the visitor (Ballantyne, Packer & Bond, 2012; Ham, 2013). These personal narratives can often be profoundly powerful and are a very important way of enabling the visitor to understand the impact of an event which may be centuries old or something perhaps which the visitor only has the vaguest understanding or, appreciation of. Some examples of the visitor responses reported by Ballantyne, Packer and Bond (2012) focus on an exhibition about the forced removal of Aboriginal children in Queensland (1869-1969) and illustrate this personal connection, they include:

'I want to learn more about Aboriginal people. These stories are important and need to be told';

'Some of the people featured in the exhibition are the same age as me ...I had no idea that this practice was occurring at the time';
'I am much more aware of what happened. These were ordinary people, like me and my family';
'The personal accounts were very moving, reading the letters brought home the feelings in such a personal way';
and,
'The exhibition made me feel very sorry, but also very lucky for my own upbringing'.
(2012: 157-161).

The recent increase in the adoption of 'smart' technology has meant that frequently interpretation now turns to the use of multiple and/or parallel voices to support this emotional connection and personal experience and a recent article by Hvenegaard, Marshall and Lemelin (2016) has explored the use of 'many voices' as an interpretive approach at Batoche National Historic Site, Saskatchewan, Canada. This location requires the presentation of a controversial historical event, where in 1885, Metis and First Nation allies were defeated by the Federal Government's North West Field Force and were ultimately forced to surrender. 'The Resistance', as it is preferred to be named, sadly claimed the lives of many soldiers and others associated with the event (brief summary derived from Hvenegaard, Marshall & Lemelin, 2016:47-8). The cultural sensitivities of the location and the events which took place there in 1885 meant that it is important to present the broadest possible picture of the Batoche NHS which means not only the political and military events culminating in the Resistance of 1885 but also the broader interpretation of the Metis Nation, their social and economic story. Hvenegaard, Marshall & Lemelin illustrate this by reporting on the work of Parks Canada and stating:

'the presentation of these events as acts of rebellion against the Canadian Government were balanced by the Metis view of these events as a desire to secure livelihood, own land, and receive respect for their cultural traditions'. (2016:52)

Hvenegaard, Marshall & Lemelin (2016) suggest that the inclusion of 'many voices' is a useful approach to adopt on a site where no agreed single viewpoint of the events being interpreted is, or can be, presented. Thus 'many voices' provides the opportunity to present the site from multiple perspectives provides on-site staff with an opportunity for the visitors to hear 'storytelling from direct experiences' (Hvenegaard, Marshall & Lemelin, 2016:53). The approach also provides interpreters and on-site managers with the opportunity to engage with local communities or groups of affected people more widely dispersed and this act of gathering and sharing stories, memories and even artefacts can be enormously important for them as well. The process may also reveal 'hidden stories' which can provide richness and even diversity to the main story being presented in the exhibition or on the site. 'Many voices' also provides the additional opportunity for discussion to take place either directly between 'the voices' or between the story teller, the voices and the visitor thus encouraging the visitor to be informed, connected but also challenged, culminating as Pannekoek states, with visitors being

given the opportunity to 'select those [voices] that resonate with their [the visitors'] experiences' (2000:208-9).

The use of a 'many voices' approach has raised a number of issues in recent years and some of these are briefly summarised below:

1. *'Does one voice provide the 'dominant narrative' or do you offer multiple, parallel narratives'*. Critics of a 'many voices' approach often focus upon the difficulty for the visitor in understanding who, when, where and how to engage with the people, stories and narratives which are being presented to them. One suggestion is that a single, balanced narrative (of a non-judgemental nature) should guide the visitor through the range of people, stories and narratives which will unfold for them during their on-site experience. Another possible approach could be the use of a fictional (or real) character who then introduces the 'real people and their stories' as the visitor progresses through the exhibition or around the site.
2. *'The types of voices used'*. Critics have suggested that visitors will tend to focus more on a voice which they recognise either because of the accent or dialect, language used, tone or gender. It is suggested therefore that care should be taken to ensure that a dominant voice(s) does not emerge inadvertently through the interpretation. A good example of this is where a visitor applies 'authority' to a voice simply due to its tone (or other characteristic) even when this assumption is largely incorrect based upon the stories being interpreted.
3. *'Too many ideas and themes are being presented'*. Whilst 'many voices' is designed to encourage debate in what might be a controversial or emotional subject, it is not designed to confuse the visitor. It has been suggested that key stories need to be clearly identified and that the use of 'parallel voices' in particular, should only concentrate on these key stories thus enabling the use of other forms of on-site interpretation to bring in other ideas or themes. This danger of confusion should not imply however that this type of on-site interpretation needs to be commodified to the extent that it is unduly 'wrapped up' for the visitor.
4. *'Giving time for reflection'*. As a potentially powerful tool 'many voices' can be challenging for the visitor, the 'shock value', indeed a charge of 'over-sensationalising' the event(s) has been suggested by some and it has been recommended that this approach requires a longer 'processing time' for the visitor. Opportunities should therefore be provided where the visitor, either in isolation or in their social group, can take a little time to think, process and ideally discuss what they have seen and heard. This can also be supported through the involvement of an on-site interpreter who can gently guide, encourage and even facilitate a conversation between visitors, and thus support any reaction and/or resulting reflection which takes place.

5. Finally, 'many voices' should provide visitors with '*somewhere to share their experience*'. Whilst the response from visitors will of course vary greatly, the approach can be hugely powerful for many and in consequence it is important that the visitors have the opportunity to share, reflect and comment upon their experience. Opportunities with on-site interpreters has already been mentioned, other obvious outlets might be; a visitors book, a response wall, blog or social media posts specific to the exhibition or site as a whole where visitors can react to, and respond to, what they have seen and heard. In many exhibitions, it is now quite common for these responses to be directly incorporated such that the final 'exhibit' becomes something which demonstrates an active and 'live' contribution from the visitors (Ballantyne, Packer & Bond, 2012; Haan, 2005).

'Many voices' is a valuable interpretive tool, it enables the presentation of multiple views, perspectives and opinions to be heard at the same time which can be powerful in encouraging the visitor to take part in a conversation, to react and reflect on what they have seen and heard and thus hopefully leave the exhibition or site with a range of views from which they can form their own judgment or even re-visit a long-held opinion or belief which may now seem less valid to them.

(1,764 words)

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