

AHI article (Autumn 2024)

Bitesize 5 – The art of storytelling

Telling a good story is an integral part in the creation of most pieces of interpretive media. In researching this article, I found myself standing next to an elderly lady in a museum exhibition, she was reading a panel and as I approached, she turned and spoke to me “They suffered so much didn’t they” she said, referring to the panel she had been reading. Her comments reminded me of the importance of the human element in any piece of good storytelling.

The literature in exploring the art of storytelling identifies a number of key principles to help the interpreter engage the story and its accompanying messages more successfully with the visitor.

- Include a strong human element, be that in the form of a character or far better, through the use of a real person directly linked to the history of the site. Brochu & Merriman (2002) suggest that this can be best achieved through the use of cultural informants who can connect in a more powerful way with the visitor than pure narrative often can.
- To bring the story to life for a modern audience these characters need to relate their experiences directly to that of the visitors, who may not always grasp the whole story, its implications or indeed even find it particularly interesting to them and their life experiences. Ham (2013) talks about the importance of self-referencing so that, through the story, the visitor is enabled and encouraged to think about themselves and relate the story directly to their own experiences. A really effective way of doing this is often to allow the visitor to hear the characters speak to them directly ideally through a costumed performance but alternatively through a narrated piece.
- Artefacts are important to ‘frame’ a story. Unsurprisingly, the more personal the artefact, the more likely it is to engage and make a direct connection with the visitor.

This article explores these and other principles through asking fifty visitors the simple question ‘What helps to bring a story to life for you?’. This research has been undertaken at a range of cultural and heritage sites across the UK’s south-west peninsula. In terms of their social grouping: 6 were alone; 12 were with a partner and 32 with family and/or friends. This research only focused on the responses of adults and thus the response of any children within family groups was not captured.

A breakdown of the type of location visited is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Type of location visited

Cultural / Heritage site = 64%
Museum (general) = 24%
Museum / Gallery exhibition = 12%

The nature of the locations visited along the south-west coastline meant that some very specific and consistent themes were being presented within the stories, and these are recorded in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes of the stories being viewed

Smugglers and/or Pirates = 25%
Shipwrecks = 23%
Lives of local people = 18%
Customs and Excise Officers = 13%
The sea and the coastline = 11%
The ship's cargo = 10%

In exploring the visitors' experience of storytelling, a range of responses emerged which are grouped here for ease of presentation.

Characters and their traits

In exploring what made some characters more likeable than others and indeed what traits the visitors found most easy to relate to, the following comments emerged.

Characters perceived as 'likeable' (56%) were the most popular, even if they were also regarded as being a 'rogue' (21%) or a 'villain' (15%). Characters who were flawed (31%) were also regarded as being easier to relate to, as were those who formed part of a family unit in the story (12%).

Visitors preferred characters who were identified by a name, be that real (32%) or a pseudonym (26%). Likewise, 'real' characters from history (64%) were more strongly favoured over purely fictional characters (46%).

Media adopted

In terms of the range of media adopted in order to tell the story, the following sequence of preferences emerged, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Preferences for media adopted to present the stories being viewed

1 st : Costumed performance (real person from history)
2 nd : Costumed performance (fictional character or 'job role', named or unnamed from history)
3 rd : Re-enactment / Demonstration performances
4 th : Audio-visual presentation
5 th : Exhibits and artefacts
6 th : Interpretative panels

Costumed interpretation came across very strongly (77% as first or second choice) and in consequence visitors were invited to respond on what aspect of the performance they found most engaging in telling the story. Their responses in order of preference are recorded as follows: telling a good story about life at that time (67%); use of humour and anecdotes in the story (54%) was strongly favoured too. Drama and musical performances (28%) or offering a guided experience around the site as part of the story (27%) were also favoured. Listening to a reading / poetry (12%) and/or taking part in a Q&A (6%) were the least popular experiences.

Time length

In terms of length of the storytelling experience (excluding guided walks around the site), the range of responses recorded in order of preference were as follows: less than five minutes (36%); six – ten minutes (52%); more than ten minutes (12%). For those visitors who were happy to engage with a longer experience, two key points emerged: first, they wanted to be advised of the opportunity in advance, on the site's website or via social media so that they could plan their visit accordingly. Second, they preferred it to be as part of a guided site experience, typically a guided walk.

Initial visitor engagement with story

Visitors were asked what helped them to initially engage with the story and its content. The strongest response was for a named 'living' character (46%), followed by a personal artefact (30%), unnamed character (12%) and then a specific event or date from history (12%).

Visitors were also asked what helped to hold their attention with the story being presented. Being able to ask questions (43%) was the strongest response, followed by caring about the fate of the character(s) (37%) and being able to participate in the experience, in some way (21%).

Audience

Finally, in asking about who the experience should be aimed at, not unsurprisingly the most popular response was 'for families' (57%), although within this a specific focus on children was mentioned by 78%. An adult audience was the second most popular response at 39%, whilst 'anyone' was mentioned by 4%.

What broad themes emerge from this study?

1. *The human element behind the story features strongly.* Reminding us of the importance of identifying a lead character(s) who can not only 'tell a good story' for your visitors but in so doing ideally speak directly to them. Where possible these characters should be real people who can reflect their own life experience alongside the history of the site.
2. *The appeal of costumed interpretation.* Another strong theme through this research was the value of costumed performances in bringing the past to life. The enthusiasm and passion which is typically delivered through these performances can be incredibly powerful in helping visitors to make intellectual as well as emotional connections with the site, its people and history.
3. *The value of artefacts.* Artefacts and indeed the more personalised the better also came across strongly in this research. The prominent display of an artefact can be a valuable way of creating an initial link where the visitor's interest is aroused in hearing the story behind it. Beyond this, making an initial connection through a tangible artefact to a more intangible subject and its associated stories can be profoundly important in 'holding' the visitor's attention and engagement.
4. *A passion for good storytelling* is clearly important. Passion was of course Tilden's 'priceless ingredient' and in this context the interpreter needs to demonstrate their skill and passion in telling a good story. Delivering the story's narrative in a logical way with appropriate transitions where necessary, with style and enthusiasm, making personal connections throughout, and concluding with appropriate take-away messages all form part of the practice of good storytelling.
5. *Increasing enjoyment, through participation.* Making the story enjoyable will always help to engage and 'hold' the visitor. In this study, it was interesting to note the number of visitors who appreciated the opportunity to engage with the story directly through participation, this included responding directly to particular points in the story [booing, cheering, clapping] (59%), making sound effects (32%), dancing (14%) and singing (8%), beyond the obvious opportunity for a Q&A. It is always worth reflecting on whether sufficient opportunities are created for this type of engagement when a story is being told.

It is important to note that the visitors in this survey had voluntarily chosen to visit a site and engage with its stories and so it might be suggested that there is a bias in these results, in that they do not capture the reasons for not engaging with an individual story or indeed the site as a whole.

A further interesting reflection on this study is the lack of reference to authenticity in any of the visitor's responses. Whether this is because they simply assumed that the stories they were engaging with were true and authentic it is not possible to say, but it is interesting to note that a concept which features so consistently in the views of visitors at cultural and heritage sites did not emerge here.

In concluding, a reminder of the work of Ham (2013:19), successful interpretation has: '*A strong theme, is easy to follow, matters to the audience and is enjoyable to process*'.

(1,686 words)

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Further reading

Brochu, L. and Merriman, T. 2002. *Personal interpretation: Connecting your audience to heritage resources*. Fort Collins, CO: InterpPress

Ham, S.H. 2013. *Interpretation: Making a difference on purpose*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.

Lee, J. 2023. *A practical guide to costumed interpretation*. London: Routledge.

Tilden, F. 2007. *Interpreting our heritage*. 4th ed. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press.