

Interpretation is Persuasive When Themes are Compelling¹

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What is “persuasion?”

When psychologists talk about persuasion, they mean communication (whether verbal or nonverbal) that convinces or compels an audience to *think, feel* or *behave* in a certain way. The term “persuasion” is vague until the desired outcomes have been specified. In communication psychology, these outcomes are typically classified as cognitive, affective and behavioural, and in interpretation, we often talk about knowing, feeling and doing objectives (the cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes we hope to achieve through an interpretive activity or device). “Persuasion” means achieving one or more of these objectives.

“Persuasion” implies manipulation. When interpreters talk about using persuasive communication, they, too, must recognise that their expressed intent is to manipulate how their audiences think, feel and behave. Yes, we invoke a variety of euphemisms to justify our need to manipulate our audiences (e.g., “use of interpretation as a management tool,” “managing visitor behaviour,” etc.), but there is little doubt that we are squarely in the manipulation business. We may want people to think or know certain things so that they will have a rich experience; we often want them to value what we value; and we almost always want them to behave in certain ways (and not in others) when they are in the midst of the places and things we interpret. That is, we want to manipulate them to think, feel and behave in certain ways. There is perhaps more of a Machiavellian underpinning to contemporary interpretation than we’d like to admit. But there is no mistaking the fact that interpreters are in the manipulation business.

Thematic interpretation as persuasion

A premise of thematic interpretation is that getting a theme (message) across to an audience can “persuade” by producing desired knowing, feeling and doing outcomes. And this is certainly true when the theme is strong and compelling to the audience it is intended to impact. But lame or weak

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themes don't have that effect. They mainly just bore people. We have grown a little weary of those few who still cling tenaciously to the old "teacher-tell" model of interpretation wherein interpreters are advised to set "knowing" objectives that specify what visitors will remember after an interpretive program (e.g., "they will be able to state three reasons that...", or "the four ways that...", or "the five kinds of..."). As explained elsewhere (Ham, 2003), this sort of thinking produces interpretive programs that are focused too narrowly on audiences' factual recall of esoteric content. Nothing in interpretive philosophy has ever supported this approach, and Tilden (1957) and others have made painstaking efforts to distinguish interpretation from the "teacher-tell" model of information transfer (hence the famous ending to Tilden's definition of interpretation: "...rather than simply to communicate factual information." Yet, some still advocate this approach, due perhaps to its simplicity and the methodological convenience of giving visitors "exams" to test their post-programme recall. But other than its convenience and utter simplicity, we can think of no benefit of seeing (or even worse, practising) interpretation as a fact-giving process. It is intended to move us, not "teach" us. Most interpreters would agree that the two are qualitatively different.

Although any theme expresses a "fact," it is the profundity of the fact and the way it is presented that produces the desired result. Remembering the theme is a useful thing, but alone, a visitor's recollection of a theme says little about whether the interpretive programme accomplished anything important. Weak themes based on recall objectives really don't achieve much, even if every visitor remembers every fact (which, of course, they virtually never do). Strong themes, on the other hand, can lead to a number of knowing, feeling and doing outcomes an interpreter might find appealing.

But what, then, is a strong or "persuasive" theme? It is one that makes a person think, wonder or ponder. All of these outcomes are what psychologists call "elaboration," which is just a fancy word for good, old fashion thinking. Tilden (1957) summed up the purpose of interpretation in a single word, "provocation." When we are provoked by interpretation, we wonder about it, ponder it, and sometimes entertain new and wonderful possibilities about a place or thing or concept. We *think*. Interpretation that "provokes" is compelling. It usually results in implanting new beliefs about the thing being interpreted, or in existing beliefs being changed or replaced. Either way, the result is a cognitive structure that produces feelings and sometimes behaviours that are consistent with the new or modified beliefs. If reinforcement of a compelling theme occurs within a fairly short time period, its impact on a visitor's psyche can be enduring, even permanent. Space is too limited here to explain in detail the pathways through which these influences occur, but the basic psychology of the phenomenon

is well established in research on the theories of reason action and planned behaviour, elaboration likelihood model, and schema theory. Readers interested in learning more about these theories, and about the research that supports them, should take a look at the asterisked (*) references at the end of this article. If you're interested in how these theories are being applied in interpretation, you might want to look at the references marked with a plus (+) sign.

Thematic interpretation as “meaning making”

Thus, interpretation is not merely entertaining fact-giving (so-called “infotainment”). If we buy Tilden's premise that the visitor's “chief interest” is squarely in the “here and now”, can we agree that, at its best, interpretation will be focused on connecting the visitor to the place? As many of us (Goldman et al., 2001; Ham, 2002; Kohen and Sikoryak, 2001) have asked, can we accept that a theme is not just some arbitrary statement of fact, but rather a singular statement that captures the meaning we hope will be internalized in a visitor's psyche in order to achieve some combination of knowing, feeling or doing objectives? If we can agree on this premise, then it is possible to see interpretation not as arbitrary theme-giving aimed at producing factual recall, but rather as purposeful meaning-making aimed at impacting another human being's point of view about a place, a feature, or an idea in a way that produces desired outcomes that are, in turn, consistent with an organisation's goals.

So to be “persuasive,” interpretation must not be guided by mere fact-giving objectives. Far better, and more consistent with human psychology and interpretive philosophy, would be for it to be guided by *meaning-making* objectives. Rather than determining if audiences can simply name and list facts, shouldn't evaluations be asking, “Do visitors get the theme in the sense that they say and ask about things that are consistent with the theme?” “Can audiences say what the big deal or main idea was?” “Can they elaborate on the key thing they think they learned?” Did it impact their point of view in desired ways? Do they now think, feel or behave the way we hoped they would?

We want to encourage all of us (especially those few who are still advocating “teacher-tell” thinking) to move beyond the notion that themes have anything whatsoever to do with an objective of audiences remembering factual information. To be “persuasive,” interpreters should concentrate on getting compelling themes across to their audiences, rather than on producing recall of facts.

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