



The Craft of Engagement

Many sites are asking, “How will we thrive in the 21st century?”

Interpreters are looking for innovative ways to engage diverse audiences with a variety of backgrounds and interests. Some are investing in more technology or crowd-drawing entertainment.

Some are investing in trainings that polish traditional interpretive skills, while refreshing program content and adding new techniques. Of paramount importance is finding ways to include the diverse layers of story that each site holds.



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This article may help you explore why being entertaining is one part of what it takes to create and deliver an A+ program that meets your goal to “forge emotional and intellectual connections to your resource.” Included here are examples of creative programming that will inspire you to try new approaches at your site.

From Entertainer to Advocate

When I was simply a touring songwriter, I kept falling in love with places and returning later to find them heartbreakingly changed. I wanted to say something to audiences about what I was seeing, but how? I wanted to evoke caring that led to action.

I wanted to be more than entertainment.

My solution then was writing story-songs. My CD “Good Summer Rain” was a collection that explored diverse ways people connect to places. I partnered with the Trust for Public Land, a national conservation organization, which gave me a platform to feel comfortable talking about the changes I was seeing, and what we could do about it.

In the title song, I explored the story of someone who might have sold his or her family farm, and regretted it. The song helps listeners empathize with loss, and the struggle of our changing landscapes and economic times. It’s not really literal, or a lecture about my feelings on the topic. It’s intentionally crafted to provoke people to come to their own conclusions.

The result was that something started to shift. After shows, people began telling me stories—about places they loved, places they'd lost or were in fear of losing. They started asking questions about how to save the family farm.

After a decade of touring as a performing artist, plus now an additional decade of speaking, training, and advocacy—working directly with heritage sites and interpreters across the country—I can assure you that evoking stories of connection leads to engagement and action. And that it is possible to motivate visitors who may arrive simply expecting entertainment to become supporters looking for ways to actively care.

Entertainment or Education?

In many cultures, stories, songs, poems, and dances are not just for celebration and fun, but also to teach and inform. In our modern American society, there is a tendency to separate arts and entertainment, from learning and education. In the same regard, some interpreters tend to default into either being mostly entertaining, or mostly giving information because that's their comfort zone.

Effective interpretive programs seamlessly blend the arts and information. They are not only educational and enjoyable, but they stir the heart and soul to care.

As Tilden's third principle of interpretation states, "Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable." Fortunately, mastering the art of interpretation is something you can continue to hone throughout your life.

The role of entertainment in interpretation therefore is simply that it makes a good program great. While it's true entertainment is a great release valve, your program can and should be more than that. It should dig deeper, and could possibly change the way people see, think, and feel.

Stories from the Field

In my work with interpreters and visitors, I have offered techniques that help people discover, share, and evoke personal stories of connection to place. Here is a sampling.

1. Find a Story: New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, Youth Leadership Academy (YLA)

YLA helps local youth develop leadership skills and connect to their national parks. For part of their training, we went to the museum that housed scrimshaws, which are stories that are carved on whale teeth, often as entertainment on long, lonely ship voyages. They are also memory books, conveying what life was like in the past.

Rather than just telling the stories or discussing the significance of items behind glass, I said, "Go find a tooth and tell me the story." There was an element of play and discovery, and also a way of empowering visitors—they didn't have to be any kind of expert at all to find a connection.

Afterwards, I asked them to draw a story they wanted to tell. They were all inspired to do so. We talked about current examples of that kind of communication in our world—everything from tattoos to street murals. One of the youth summed up his experience by saying, "Finding your park is really just like finding yourself."

Their experience with scrimshaw was not as a dusty historical object, but rather a tangible, personally relevant entry point into story and self-expression.

2. Be a Story: Everglades National Park: Nike Missile Site Tour

This site focuses on America and the Cold War, and shares stories of the young soldiers stationed there. A frontline interpreter and two-time combat veteran named Scott attended my interpretive training which he said gave him a chance to connect his personal story to the park and feel comfortable sharing it with others. He created a unique program that

uses story and play and encourages participation and sharing.

After he sets the context for the events, he explains, "For the next 90 minutes, *everyone* is a teenager again." Each person has a story card about the life of a soldier doing his job, getting into teenage mischief, and missing home. Scott then shares part of his personal military experience. He asks guests to reflect on what it means when people step up and care about something, be that national safety or a national park. His call to action is asking people to take a stand and step up when they care about something.

Scott's skillful blending of story and information turns the somber topic of war into an opportunity for understanding and empathy. His tours could be dry and informational, but instead they are a playful experience that creates the safety so that visitors can relate and share personal stories. Because of the level of engagement on his tours, Scott's supervisor made up an award just for him: "Best Emotional Connections."

3. Share a Story: Youth Conservation Corps, Fall River, Massachusetts

These youth take part in on-the-ground stewardship, from clearing trails to planting and harvesting food for the local community. They gain skills in communication, leadership, and team-building. Each year they create skits to present at their regional meeting, which traditionally focuses on sharing what they have done.

Through the Trustees of Reservations, I came to help the youth develop their storytelling and creativity skills.

Starting with a process to discover personal stories, many remarked they were surprised at the connections they found, and the power that places held for them. They expressed how usually their writings were "darker." One even said his songs were usually "vulgar." They uncovered and articulated the gifts that being in nature and doing community work had brought into their lives. From there, we explored the work they were doing—literally and symbolically—and they collaboratively created skits with



songs, poetry, and movement that explain not just what they did, but why it mattered to them, to the earth, and to their community.

These could have been simply playful skits, but they carried a relatable message. Their supervisor told me that afterward, funders and staff were surprised and delighted to see this different side of the youth. “They were funny, reflective, and soulful—not a side of the teens that they ordinarily get to see.”

4. Evoke a Story: Soulful Sense of Place Performances and Workshops

When I work directly with visitors offering public programs, I combine my experience as a performer and educator with my knowledge of interpretation to evoke meaningful connections to place.

For public performances, I curate a journey of songs, stories, readings, and interactive questions that illuminate what is special about each site and foster deeper appreciation. At an event sponsored by Friends of the Mississippi River, one woman remarked, “I’ve lived here all my

life, but you helped me see this place through new eyes.”

For public workshops I take participants through a powerful process of discovering personal sense of place stories. Attendees have reported using the content they generated to create everything from poems to novels, and valued the opportunity to “reflect on their connection to the land, their personal history and their best selves.”

These offerings could be simply entertaining, but they develop greater appreciation for places by linking the program content to the significance of each site. They could be simply informative, but they are less “sage on the stage,” and more “guide on the side” because they are crafted intentionally to evoke the meaning and stories inside each attendee.

Conclusion: Places Impact Us

Visitors arrive at your sites with their own stories, perceptions, backgrounds, cultures, and worldviews. Studies have identified that common reasons for visiting a site are recreational, social, scenic, educational, spiritual, and

emotional. Often it is those harder-to-measure motivations that are the “true” reason people visit: The yearning to feel something real, to regain a sense of wonder, or to restore the soul.

In a time when our senses are often overloaded with a barrage of information, a visit to your site is not only an opportunity for enjoyment or learning, but a much-needed chance to slow down and reflect on the meaning of events and an opportunity to make sense of our lives and the world. And coming together face to face to share experiences also helps rekindle a sense of community and belonging that many are looking for.

Tom Wessels wrote in his book *The Myth of Progress* that “reflective practice is essential to convert knowledge into understanding and eventually, wisdom.” In this age of digital experiences, it’s becoming more important than ever to experience “the real thing.”

Helping people give voice to the layers of story that each place holds or evokes is exactly what is needed to ensure the relevance of places in people’s lives today and for the future.

Whether sites use outside presenters for events, or use in-house staff, the goal is not to showcase what they know, or how entertaining they can be. It is to craft engaging experiences that help visitors connect to your site by discovering the stories and connections within.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erica Wheeler is a visitor experience specialist, interpretive trainer and award-winning songwriter. She was a keynote at the 2007 NAI National Conference and has worked with parks, museums, and learning centers across the country, from the National Mall and Memorial Parks to Yosemite National Park, to help inspire meaningful connections between people and place. For information, visit www.ericawheeler.com.