

**Professional Development Workshop
Sponsored by the Independent Folklorists' Section**

Thematic Interpretation in Public Folklore

Friday, October 21, 2005

1:30-5:15 p.m.

Workshop Leaders:

- Teri F. Brewer, University of Glamorgan and Brewer, Wells, and Associates Cultural Resource Services
- Patricia Wells, Independent Folklorist and Brewer, Wells, and Associates Cultural Resource Services
- Doris Dyen, Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area, Discussant

Report prepared by Margaret T. McGehee, Emory University

This document reports on a professional development workshop for graduate students and new professionals in the field of folklore studies sponsored by the AFS at its 2005 annual meeting in Atlanta. The Folk and Traditional Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts provided funding for this workshop.

The purpose of this two-part workshop, offered by two folklorists and certified interpretive guides and trainers, was to lead participants through a series of exercises designed to introduce theories and practices of professional interpretation and its application to thematic cultural interpretation. As stated in the AFS program, informal in-service programs in environmental and cultural interpretation offered by public agencies and other heritage sites have now developed into a professional specialization potentially very useful to public folklorists, few of whom have had much direct contact with interpretive their or training programs. Folklorists have a potentially important contribution to make to the interpretive conversation. Most current teaching about interpretation involves a focus on the object-, site-, or landscape-based programs. Folklorists' experience as developers of people-centered events offers the possibility of adding important supplementary models to the interpretive repertoire.

PART 1

Teri Brewer and Pat Wells began this interactive, hands-on session with an exercise for the workshop participants. Each audience member was given a handout with a busy black and white pattern and were instructed to find the five-pointed star hidden in the pattern. Few people could find it, leading Teri to ask: "Why can't we see it?" Because the image provided was so busy, it was difficult for participants to work through the complex visual field and find one particular image. Teri and Pat compared this exercise to the work of folklorists who must develop a central idea or theme for exhibits, heritage sites, or other projects out of a mass of information and research.

From there, Teri and Pat introduced participants to the larger concept of interpretation, essentially defined as the ways in which museums, festivals, and other forms of cultural study make meanings accessible to an audience.

A second exercise followed. Similar to “speed dating,” participants were asked to form groups of two and then gather an oral history of one another, with five minutes allotted to each interview. Each person was then required to extract a theme from the interview and present their partner in terms of that theme. They could also discuss what they envisioned an exhibit derived from this theme would look like. Participants presented their varied ideas over the course of half an hour. Teri noted at the end of the exercise that everyone had found a focal point for their informant but, at the same time, had much more information added on to their portrait of that person as well.

Teri and Pat proceeded to launch a discussion of how to refine themes for diverse audiences. Terri shared examples of her own work and travels through several images in Powerpoint. In the course of this discussion, Teri and Pat reminded participants of the importance of understanding that you (the folklorist) are not your audience. Therefore, you need to think carefully about your audience’s knowledge, interests, tastes, and needs, as well as the ideas with which you and informants or participants may be working.

Following this discussion, Teri and Pat talked about the National Association of Interpretation (NAI). NAI is the major professional association for interpretative training in the United States. In their attempt to establish a standardized system of interpretation, NAI’s definitions and training program tend to be a bit more narrowly focused than the ways in which folklorists use the term “Interpretation.” However, their approaches and training are widespread and influential, and can be applied and modified to support the kinds of cultural programs folklorists are involved in developing. NAI is in the early stages of approaching and interpreting cultural heritage. The NAI definition of interpretation is “a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interest of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource” (that which is being interpreted). Interpretation is an educational activity that aims to reveal meanings. (Teri recommended that participants look at Freeman Tilden’s books for more ideas on interpretation. His books have become “bibles” of interpretation and are regularly used in many field, including advertising.)

Interpretation, Teri and Pat emphasized, should be:

- _____ Enjoyable
- _____ Relevant
- _____ Organized
- _____ Thematic
- _____ Purposeful (in the sense that one wants a particular result from the process beyond providing the audience with information)

The theme is the primary message that you want to deliver to your audience, and it differs from the general topic with which you are working. The theme helps narrow the focus of

a topic and helps to answer the question of “So what?” It is typically stated in a complete sentence, and it serves to connect tangibles and intangibles.

By way of example, Doris Dyen discussed her experience in developing a theme for the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in Pennsylvania. After many years of trying to distill a theme that would encompass the many aspects of the region (economic, ethnic, political, natural, etc.), she and her colleagues arrived at the following: “Pittsburgh was the steel capital of the world for over 100 years.” Among the reasons for the development of this theme was to improve their tour program. Their tour program had relied on local guides who had grown up in the area and who knew practically everything there was to know about their communities. However, they were not necessarily good presenters—they tended to offer their audience too many details, too many statistics, and too much information in general.

Therefore, the heritage area brought in trainers from the National Association of Interpretation to lead workshops to help the heritage area refine its mission, plan a variety of interpretive media and products, and train (new) guides to offer appropriate interpretation for their audiences. The NAI trainers provided the guides with pointers on keeping their tour to a specific time limit, but they also addressed how to talk at length after a tour with those wanting to know more. In general, the training helped the volunteers and docents tie into the Rivers of Steel organization and its message.

Doris provided workshop participants with handouts illustrating how her organization arrived at a theme as well as brochures and maps detailing the themes within each region of the heritage area and the various tours offered. She pointed out that the sub-themes of each area are intended to work with the larger theme but also focus specifically on the local area and what the people there want others to know about their area.

At this point, a question was posed to Doris: What has the theme for the Rivers of Steel area allowed her to do that she could not do before? Doris responded that it has allowed her organization to develop a variety of materials focused on a central idea. Furthermore, the theme has allowed her group to develop different programs geared to different audiences. Such a theme, she commented, allows for multiple directions for interpretation.

Her organization took the theme and focused on creating a number of different tours within the heritage area. They published an extensive guidebook to the area that can be purchased for \$20. However, they also created a free tour map of the area to reach other potential audiences (e.g., families, people of lower incomes, etc.) for whom \$20 was not an affordable price. Doris stated that throughout all of these projects, it was important to consider the amount of information one could take in mentally as well as the physical demands of the tour.

Another participant asked Doris about the effects of using a theme for the heritage area. She said that there has been an increase in attendance at various sites in the area.

Teri commented that a theme can be equally useful for an organization in terms of providing clarity of mission. In this way, the staff can use their energy and imagination efficiently for other aspects of their work. Moreover, the thematic interpretation approach helps presenters know what they want to say and to focus so that they do not lose their audience.

PART 2

The second half of this workshop focused on helping participants develop themes for their own projects. Teri and Pat reminded participants that themes ideally provoke the audience to think, allow the audience to relate (or make connections) to the material presented, reveal something to the audience, and answer the question of “so what?” Pat placed large pieces of paper on the wall, each titled with a different category: Resources, Interpretations, Goals, Purposes, Desired Outcomes, and Themes. She instructed the audience to offer ideas and examples from their own work for each category. She first asked participants to offer example of the ***resources*** that they are working with at their respective organizations. Answers included tradition bearers, folk artists, performers, natural sites, historic sites, and local businesses. She then asked participants to offer examples of the ***interpretations*** that they had created around these resources. Responses included both personal and impersonal items: K-12 programs (lesson plans that meet state education criteria; activities); signage; guided activities and walking tours; a website; published guides and articles; and presentations of performers at festivals. Next, participants provided their ***goals*** for their respective projects. The central goal that emerged their work was “communicating a message.” ***Purposes*** included increasing site usage, educating children, providing entertainment, connecting people and organizations, and mitigating or interpreting change. Desired ***outcomes*** included attracting diverse visitors, attracting locals to a venue, and economic development (esp. in heritage areas or in places where the loss of industries had created hardships).

Some participants had already developed themes in their work, such as “Blessed by Water, Worked By Hand.” However, most of the workshop participants seemed to be in the process of developing and brainstorming themes for their respective projects. One attendee is working on a project related to national refugee and immigrant artists. She wants to foster the development of networks and collaborations among and between these artists; she also wants to highlight their stories and examine the ways that such stories shape the broader American public. Based on what this participant offered in terms of her resources, goals, desired outcomes, and purposes, participants threw out keywords related to the project, eventually resulting in the beginning stages of a theme. The group then took up another participant’s project and used the same brainstorming techniques to arrive at a working theme that would be useful for his work in the Washington State Parks. For the remainder of the workshop, Teri and Pat continued to work with workshop participants to develop themes for their respective projects.

In concluding the workshop, Teri and Pat reminded participants of the purposes of thematic interpretation and repeated definitions of key terms. They asked participants to complete a brief evaluation form and also provided participants with information on training programs offered through the National Association for Interpretation.

