

Narratives for Interpretation

The famous psychologist J. Bruner, postulates that we use two ways of thinking: “a paradigmatic and a narrative one”.¹ The first one is ‘logic’ and looks for causal relations (deduction, induction, abduction). It deals with facts and objective truth. The narrative way of thinking deals with human intentions, feelings and personal experiences.

Both ways of thinking play a role in interpretation. Facts, figures and objective truth are indeed important but most important in interpretation is to relate them to the meaning making frame of the visitor. Here the stories come in. The major argument for introducing storytelling in guided tours and mediated interpretation is the fact that stories are offered through a ‘narrative pattern’. Any story is a narrative and its structure reflects the way we, as a learning individual, give meaning to (or make sense out of) personal experiences. Story-shaped information is more easily absorbed by our brains, so to speak. Offering content through narratives is considered to be beneficial to the learning process in many ways. It acts as a ‘sense making tool’, supports our imagination and capacity to memorise and contributes to identity development .

Storytelling as a meaning making tool

“Narrative is a fundamental structure of human meaning making” says J. Bruner ². Also M. Clark and M. Rossiter are convinced that “Meaning making is a narrative process. We make sense of our everyday experiences by storying them, by constructing narratives that make things cohere. It is a matter of locating experiences within a particular narrative or by constructing a new narrative”.³

We try to mentally connect any new piece of information to an existing related thread of thoughts. This relationship can be manifold through concepts, feelings, images, sensations, metaphors... The new elements are ‘wrapped’ as a narrative and connected to existing narratives in our head. The type of relationship between new and old narratives and the place the new narrative gets in the (cultural) clusters of old ones defines its meaning(s). “Therefore, the most effective way to reach learners with educational messages is in and through these narrative constructions. Learners connect new knowledge with lived experience and weave it into existing narratives of meaning.”⁴

¹ J. Bruner, 1986

² Ibid.

³ Clark, M. & Rossiter, M., 2008

⁴ Rossiter, M., 2002

Storytelling as a memory tool

It is not only the meaning making process that is enhanced by using stories in learning activities but also our memory profits from it. This process is enhanced by two factors: the imaginative element and the emotional element of storytelling.

When listening to a story people create images in their minds. The teller introduces images and 'conducts/orchestrates' the imagination of the people in the audience. "When adults listen to a narrative they build in their mind's eye, so to speak, a mental image or a model of the situation that is being described or of the events that unfold. It is that mental model that they retain over a long period of time rather than the particular words." ⁵

But also the emotional aspect is important. Stories appeal to the heart, they engage the listener in an emotional way, raise feelings, urge to act. "Stories are powerful precisely because they engage learners at a deeply human level. Stories draw us into an experience at more than a cognitive level; they engage our spirit, our imagination, our heart, and this engagement is complex and holistic". ⁶

Introducing stories and storytelling in interpretation

So, stories play a very important role in interpretation. In reality we probably should be talking about introducing a narrative approach to interpretation. Inserting a simple story is one of the possible ways to achieve this. Another approach though is 'storying content': offering content in a 'story way'.

The interpreter looks at the content and material of the site or collection and tries to find out what parts can be offered as (or in) a small story. This means adding elements like place, time, actions, characters, emotions and intentions of people involved, sensory details, plots, metaphors, ... in order to create images and atmosphere. One can compare it with teaching about physics and using stories like Archimedes in his bath crying out "Eureka" or explaining gravity through Newton witnessing the apple dropping to the ground in his mother's garden.

Storytelling as identity: we are our stories

*« Un homme, c'est toujours un conteur d'histoires,
il vit entouré de ses histoires et des histoires d'autrui,
il voit tout ce qui lui arrive à travers elles;
et il cherche à vivre sa vie comme s'il la racontait ».*

J.P. Sartre

Making meaning and making sense out of what we experience every day is not only an individual learning process but it is also a social constructivist learning process. As such it is also grounded in a cultural and social context. We build our narratives together with our peers, our building blocks are offered by our social environment, we cluster our narratives according to the models offered.

⁵ Harris, P., 2000

⁶ Clark and Rossiter, 2008

Clark and Rossiter support the idea that we can understand identity as a narrative construction. “The construction of an acceptable life narrative is the central process of adult development.”⁷ So, our identity is the total of our stories. But it is a dynamic concept; we add stories and we drop stories as we go on with our lives.

In this view Interpretation does not only contribute to meaning making but also to identity building of the visitors.

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InHerit, the Grundtvig Multilateral Project for professional development of heritage interpreters, delivers a competence profile, a course curriculum and training material for heritage interpreters. Full texts are available on the project website. Follow the development of InHerit on: www.interpretingheritage.eu

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This communication reflects the views only of the InHerit consortium, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information therein.

⁷ Ibid.