

Chapter 16

INCORPORATING EVALUATION INTO THE INTERPRETIVE PLANNING PROCESS AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

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Introduction

Whether you are planning a new interpretive program or renovating an existing one, the planning and evaluation process can be a threatening task for the institution's staff. By making evaluation a natural part of the planning process, much of the uneasiness and tension can be avoided. An evaluation process that brings together feedback from interpreters, visitors, curators, and educators will not only make the idea of change less frightening for the organization, but will also ensure a more effective interpretive program for our visitors. As Duncan Cameron (1967) stated:

"Without feedback, ours cannot be a self-correcting system. We cannot locate our errors and our weaknesses, whether in an exhibit, a public relations campaign, or an extension program, and thus we cannot know how to modify our output for greater effectiveness."

The challenge for all of us involved in planning interpretations is to find ways to make interpretation and the planning process not only a self-correcting system but one that incorporates evaluation as a natural part of our work. Implementing change amongst interpreters is no small task and if it is not handled with attention to the needs and experiences of the interpreters the process will fail. By including feedback from interpreters as well as visitors during the planning process the likelihood of change being enthusiastically embraced will be great. Part of the process must also involve an examination and comparison of planners' and interpreters' expectations of visitors.

In this paper, I will share with you first a brief overview of our interpretive planning process that we apply to our larger projects at

Colonial Williamsburg and then I will review some of the lessons learned from one specific program. For those of you struggling with the evaluation of live interpretive programs, I hope that you may find some useful information.

The Ten Year Plan

In 1985, the leaders of our educational and research departments produced a plan for research and interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg. The plan, aptly titled "Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg", set forth the key interpretive issues around which all present and future interpretive programs and exhibits should focus. For many of the staff, the document was a positive step towards organizing ourselves around some specific themes. The authors stated in their introduction that this was to be a blueprint for the future. They acknowledged that new research and other events might alter some of the plans and that there would be changes made to some of the objectives. The interpretive goal was divided into four subthemes and each of our thirty-five sites and programs was listed under one of the four subthemes. For each site the authors identified the key issues that the interpretations should emphasize. Between 1985 and 1989 we have completed the reinterpretation of five sites and the implementation of one new program under the guidelines of the new plan. The process of translating the ideas of the plan into exciting, meaningful interpretations for our visitors continues to be a challenging one.

The Planning Process

Assumptions. The planning process that has evolved is based on certain assumptions about challenges ahead of us. These challenges include:

- Finding an efficient means to incorporate new research into the exhibition and interpretation of each site.
- Ensuring that at the end of the project we would actually see and hear a new interpretive program.
- Determining, through appropriate measures, the most effective techniques to communicate our new storylines.
- Convincing interpreters that the new research and new interpretive theme would be an exciting and positive experience for both themselves and their audiences.
- Solving all of the challenges stated above and still complete the process within our lifetime.

Selection and Training of Interpretive Planning Team.

- The team was composed of a curator, a historian, an instructor, two interpreters and an interpretive supervisor, plus an interpretive planner.
- Training included the planning process, interpersonal communication skills, how to run an effective meeting, and pitfalls to avoid based on earlier projects.
- Review of "Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg".

Steps in the evaluation process. The following steps were used in the evaluation process:

- Plan the experiment.
- Process evaluation by the planning team.
- Visitor observations and surveys.
- Interpreter interviews.
- Producing the interpretive plan.
- Implementing the plan.
- Summative evaluation.
- Process evaluation by Educational Standards Committee.

What We Learned At Wetherburn's Tavern

Wetherburn's Tavern was one of the first projects we selected to reinterpret because we had recently uncovered some new information about the people associated with this site and we were eager to incorporate the research into our interpretations. Our curators had discovered that Henry Wetherburn and his family lived in one of the small rooms on the first floor of the tavern. Historians had also uncovered some information about Wetherburn's slaves and their function in the operations of the tavern as well as their role in the communications network with slaves who accompanied Wetherburn's clientele. Since the new research involved a number of furnishing changes and they in turn would cause a substantial change in our interpretations this site became our guinea pig.

Method

After conducting a summative evaluation of the existing interpretive program, the planning team designed a two week experiment for the purpose of testing a variety of interpretive techniques with visitors. The key elements of the experiment were:

Week One. Visitors were taken in groups of 20 on a 30 minute tour of the tavern by one interpreter and then led outside to the kitchen and laundry where the interpreter explained the story of the slaves who lived and worked in the dependencies.

Week Two. The following activities were conducted:

1. Visitors were taken in groups of 20 in specific time intervals into the tavern where they encountered a different interpreter in each room. Visitors were allowed to spend as little or as much time as they wished in any of the rooms. We called this technique stationing. Once outside the tavern visitors encountered a character interpreter portraying one of Wetherburn's slaves. The slave talked to the visitors as if they were eighteenth century travelers and after a brief presentation he or she came out of character and explained the scenario in third person.

2. We recruited twenty interpreters (out of a corps of 150) to participate in this experiment. We were very up front with them about the experimental nature of the program and how they would have to be ready to change gears at the last minute should we discover that something wasn't working. We also stressed that their participation and feedback were vital to the success of the program.

3. Although the interpretive message was the same, the techniques were not.

4. During the experiment we used a variety of methods to measure the effectiveness of the techniques. Our primary interest was in learning if any one technique was more effective than another in providing visitors with an entertaining as well as educational experience.

Results

The results can be divided into three areas: a check of the evaluation process; interviews of the interpreters; and visitor surveys and observations.

Evaluation Process. The process evaluation produced the following observations. Although some of our interpretive objectives were presented loud and clear by our interpreters, others were almost non-existent. This held true during both weeks of the experiment.

During the first two days of the first week several visitors left the tours before they were over. This was not a good sign. Fortunately, this problem solved itself. Fueled with an abundance of new information, interpreters were attempting to give the encyclopedic tour of the tavern and some tours were lasting 60 minutes or more. With one morning briefing and sharing ideas about what and how to edit the interpretations, the tours reduced themselves to 30 minutes and visitors stuck with them.

During the week two stationing technique we observed less visitor-interpreter interaction. Outside in the dependencies, we observed visitors attentive and eager to ask questions of the slave character, once he/she came out of character.

We were concerned about the lack of furniture and accessories in some of the rooms, especially the room where Wetherburn's family slept and felt we needed some improvement there.

This process helped us to know what was happening and what wasn't, but now we needed to know why.

Interpreter Interviews. Interpreters told us they found it difficult to include all of our interpretive objectives due to the limited time they had to interpret with their groups. They also found that some of the objectives lacked artifacts related to the theme to support their interpretations.

Interpreters disliked stationing. Although we were very clear about which interpretive issues to bring up in each room, they never felt confident that their co-workers before and after them were sticking to the plan. They found it difficult to provide any meaningful interpretations while there were visitors coming and going in front of them. More importantly, they were unable to strike up a rapport and relationship with any one or group of visitors. Because they were unable to tell a complete story and get to know their groups and the type of information that interested them, they were also unable to receive any sense of accomplishment, which during the end of a successful tour may come in the form of questions, laughter, praise and or applause. By removing the opportunity for interpreters to receive praise from our visitors we had removed the very thing that keeps interpreters coming back to work every day.

All of the interpreters enjoyed the character interpreters who portrayed members of Wetherburn's slaves because it was new and different and they sensed excitement on the part of the visitors.

Overall, the interpreters were enthusiastic about the new interpretive storyline. A few interpreters still found it hard to believe that Mr. and Mrs. Wetherburn and their three children all slept in one small room. A few interpreters also found it difficult to use the term slave in place of the word servant.

Visitor Surveys and Observations. Visitors had no clear preference for either stationing or touring. Some preferred stationing because they liked to wander at their own pace and others preferred touring because they liked being led around by someone who knew what they were looking at. It appeared that no matter which technique we selected we couldn't please everyone.

Visitors were very excited about the character interpreter portraying a slave. Many stated that they had never associated Williamsburg with slavery before and that this presentation raised a number of questions about the subject. They were fascinated and they were eager to learn more about the other fifty percent of Williamsburg's population.

Much of the survey tested their recollection and understanding of the interpretive objectives. Their ability to recall and understand most of the objectives was impressive. There was one exception and that occurred during one of the days when it was dark and rainy. During that day, the test scores were so poor I came close to telling visitors that we had to

take their tickets back and send them home. One explanation for this finding was that on rainy days it was extremely dark inside the tavern, making it difficult to see the artifacts. The weather could also have affected visitors' moods.

During our observations we noticed that there were a certain number of objects that always caught visitors attention and resulted in a great deal of comments amongst visitors. In some cases the objects competed with the interpreters' presentation.

The most significant finding occurred amongst the interpreters conducting the surveys. I had originally planned to use interns to conduct all of the surveys, but at the last minute I was left with one intern. I substituted the other interns with interpreters who were fairly new to their job and who were not participating in the experiment. I also had one intern conducting surveys as a control against which to measure the other surveys.

After the first few surveys, interpreters were amazed. They could not believe how excited and interested visitors were about the tavern, its history, Wetherburn's family and his slaves. After having completed the first five surveys we sat down and talked about the process and the interpreters said to me, "You know I can't believe how much they can recall and understand. They are so interested in the history of this site. It's just not true what you hear in the break rooms. After we completed our training we were told by other interpreters that visitors don't really know why they come here and they are not interested in what you say nor do they recall very much of what you say. We were told not to worry so much about what we said." Fortunately, their conversations with visitors after the tavern program contradicted what the more experienced interpreters had told them.

After the interpreters conducted some observations of visitors during the program and matched their observations with surveys of the same people, they were confronted with another new perspective on an old theme. Our experiment occurred in September which is the month when we have a large number of the "newlywed and nearly dead." This term created by interpreters to describe the honeymooners and senior citizens who come to Williamsburg has created amongst the corps certain expectations concerning the visitors' behavior. On several occasions interpreters who were conducting the observations of the newlywed were amazed to discover how weak the correlation was between non-attentive behavior and interpretive recall and interest. They would watch a honeymoon couple exhibit their passionate behavior during the tours and then they would talk to them about the interpretive objectives and they would find the couple having taken in almost all of the storyline and also ask questions about something they had either seen or heard. This observation also held true for many of the senior citizens. This experience of having interpreters see their audience from another

perspective and comparing their experience with their expectations has given me and other staff members an exciting dimension to our ideas of how to bring our audiences and our interpreters closer together.

Summary

Since the experiment at Wetherburn's Tavern, a new interpretive program has been implemented and continues to be refined. The feedback from the planning team members who observed the program, combined with the feedback from interpreters and visitors, made our decisions about the nature of the new program fairly easy. By the time we had completed the furnishings project and were ready to train the other 150 interpreters we discovered that they were already excited about the upcoming changes. We did not have to worry about convincing them that the new program would be an exciting one. Information about the experiment and the visitor surveys had already spread throughout the corps from the interpreters who had been involved in the experiment. During our training, interpreters who participated in the experiment shared their experiences and gave demonstration tours to the larger corps. As new interpreters are hired and trained for this site we continue to use some of these same interpreters as well as the information gathered from the visitor surveys and observations in the training program.

As we conduct other reinterpretation projects we continue to use a combination of interpreters and interns to conduct visitor surveys and observations. This part of the process allows them to examine their expectations and compare them with the data collected from the studies. We also believe strongly in involving interpreters in the experimental phase of the program. They in turn become the champions of the revised interpretations and their enthusiasm paves the way for their co-workers. There are many elements to a successful interpretation, but one element that I have found to be the most important is that the interpreter believes in and is excited about what she is doing. This excitement and belief can be stimulated by active participation in the planning and evaluation process. Their participation brings them closer to their audience and creates a type of self-correcting process that Duncan Cameron described as vital to our total communications system.

Reference

- Cameron, D. (1967). How do we know what our visitors think? Museum News, 45(7), 31-33.