

The Interpretive Development Program: Lots of Problems and Some Possible Alternatives

For a number of years, the Interpretive Development Program has been working hard to improve interpretive practices in the national parks. Unfortunately, from the very beginning it has had problems, it has not been well received by the majority of people doing interpretation in our parks, and it has had to change.....again and again. Since 2006, I have worked for three seasons as a seasonal Park Ranger (Interpretation), and already I have seen three different versions of the "IDP" program and its methodologies.

From the beginning, the IDP program was well intended. It was trying to help the over 70,000 people who are involved in interpretation in our parks----ranging from volunteers and concessionaires to seasonal and full time NPS rangers. The program tried to improve the recreational and educational experiences visitors had, and it tried to develop and encourage new professional standards for interpreters.

The problem was that in trying to develop methods and guidelines that would improve meaningful communication and in trying to develop common tools that both professionals and volunteers could use, the IDP program quickly succumbed to some of the worse practices often found in corporate America, namely, the development of "buzz-words" understood by only a small minority of carefully trained people, the tendency to redefine commonly used words so that they have new and special meanings only understood by a minority of carefully trained people, and the development of methodologies that are not intuitive, that are not based on traditional and commonly used terms and definitions, and that often frustrate rather than help people.

Seasonal rangers are a good "bell weather" for any program attempting to help improve interpretation at all levels. They are not full-time professionals and do not attend national and/or regional training seminars where the language and methodologies of the IDP program could eventually make sense; and yet, unlike many volunteers or employees of the concessionaires, they are on the front line of interpretation, their jobs are based on the ability to do interpretation every day, and the success of the park service is often based on the success of its seasonal rangers. And the success of the IDP with seasonal park rangers is particularly important because in so many parks today, visitors only see and engage with seasonal park rangers and never see full time Park Rangers doing interpretation of any kind.

Unfortunately, among most seasonal rangers, or at least among almost all of the seasonal rangers we've met and known during our three seasons as seasonal rangers, there has been fairly universal confusion and contempt for every version of the IDP programs to date. When a program that is supposed to help communicators communicate better cannot communicate what the communicators are supposed to do, or how to use certain words or techniques, or how they are supposed to prepare their TGO's; and when seasoned experienced and very good seasonal rangers find they are totally confused, frustrated, and bewildered, or when they are mystified, puzzled, and perplexed by the latest version of the IDP program, then something is wrong. And when seasoned communicators find the procedures and methodologies of the IDP program totally unhelpful and frequently confusing, then something is wrong.

To be sure, a program that is being developed to help 70,000 interpreters ranging from volunteers and employees of the park concessionaires, to seasonal rangers and full-time permanent rangers has to be "tested" among not only the dedicated, professional interpreters within the National Park Service, but also among those who have never spoken before a crowd before, among those whose careers are not dependent on following the IDP methodologies, and among those who have worked as communicators both within national park and outside national parks. A successful program has to taken into account very different educational backgrounds, very different life experiences, and very different goals and objectives.

Essentially, a good program that is meant to help such a diverse and unpredictable audience has to be simple, it has to be intuitive, and it has to be helpful to both the experienced and the inexperienced, to the absolute neophyte and to the seasonal professional, and to as many people among the target group as possible instead of to a well defined minority of National Park Service employees.

Consequently, I am writing to say that from what I have seen of the IDP program, the latest version is a lot better than the first version I saw, and better than the version we were taught two years ago. But it has a long way to go. Simply stated, it is not intuitive, it is not particularly helpful, and it's somewhat confusing. If it were not so, why would you hear so many critical comments about it among the fairly dedicated and seasoned interpreters in the Mesa Verde National Park break room? If it was intuitive or used language which was self-evident, why would you hear so many rangers asking questions like: what's the difference between a goal and an objective this year? What's the difference between a theme and a topic? If the IDP program and methodologies made sense, why would there be so much confusion about them and so many questions about them?

In an attempt to offer a positive alternative, I have drafted a simple alternative to the current TGO outlines and process. It's only the first draft of a possible alternative, but it might help, and it might be useful.

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Preparing Your Interpretive Program

In many ways, preparing a tour or program is like writing a very short paper. It has to have some kind of theme or topic, it has to support or develop the theme or topic in some way, and it has to reach some meaningful conclusions based on what has been presented.

What makes interpretation different from just answering questions and giving a recitation of facts is that it tries to engage people, it tries to help our audiences understand more than just the historical or scientific facts, and it tries to help people develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding of what they are learning and experiencing in our parks.

Nevertheless, at the end of the day, interpretive programs are like very short papers: they have to have some kind of basic unifying theme or topic or purpose, they have to have some way of presenting or supporting that basic unifying theme or topic or purpose, and it should have some kind of conclusion that makes sense and is supported by what has been presented.

Here are some basic guidelines on how to prepare your program or tour.

Step 1: Develop the basic theme or topic of your tour or program

Ask yourself, *what is the basic theme or topic of my program* (or, of this part of your tour if you are doing a lengthy tour with different segments)? If you had to give your program a title, what would it be? Or, what would your opening sentence be? (e.g. how would you complete the sentence, "Today we are going to talk about.....?" or "Today we are going to?")

Step 2: What are you going to say or do to support your basic theme or topic?

What basic points are you going to make in support of your basic theme or topic?

What two or three or four basic thoughts or feelings or experiences do you hope to communicate or encourage during this tour?

What two or three or four things do you want to say or do or suggest during the tour or program in support of your theme or topic?

What do you hope your visitors will learn, or experience, or take away from your program (or from this part of your tour)? What basic points do you hope they will remember?

Step 3: What different techniques can you use?

What different techniques can you use during your presentation? (e.g. illustrations, educational talks, role-playing, humor....)

How will you involve the "resource" and/or your audience during your program or tour?

What additional illustrations or examples or information can you use?

Step 4: Judging your success

How will you know if your program or tour was a "success"?

What do you hope your audience will feel or do or think about at the end of your tour or program?

What kind of insights or deeper understanding of this park will be possible at the end of your tour or program?