Beyond Tokenism

Working Toward Respectful Community Partnerships

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"One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding."

—Paulo Freire
Pedagogy of the Oppressed

You've likely heard it by now—familiar calls for "safe forums" and "open dialogue" with diverse audiences echo across graduate courses to professional conferences. Yet the inclusion of community voices in the interpretive planning process does not automatically translate into respect for new and different points of view. In fact, it risks fostering token partnerships in the community—being polite to each other for an evening or a check mark off a lengthy project list. So, what does true respect really mean in the field of interpretation?

It begins with building capacity. Michael Frisch's concept of *shared authority,* which positions and empowers community members as equal partners in the process, is still fresh and relevant today. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and early champion of critical pedagogy, argued for repositioning the teacher as a guide rather than an expert to help students reach beyond their own

In the think-pair-share technique, participants shared stories in groups.

perspectives and challenge existing power structures. What could these approaches look like in the exhibit planning process? And what might that look like when, as Researcher Kathleen McLean and others have suggested, we remove authority and reimagine the entire exhibit team as a dynamic community of learners? In what ways can interpreters develop public workshops that reject token inclusion and instead shape the direction of exhibits in meaningful ways? Among many institutions experimenting with different methods nationwide, two recent interpretive planning projects put these questions to the test.

Building Bridges with Lemonade

Here in St. Paul, Minnesota, the Great River Passage encompasses 26 miles of Mississippi River frontage—a natural river corridor that stretches beyond any one neighborhood or culture. This area has been the home and the sacred ground of the Dakota for generations. The fertile river valley of the Upper Mississippi was a catalyst for growth, connecting the fur trade and agriculture to global markets. Yet today, with more than 3,500 acres of parkland for outdoor recreation, the passage lacks cohesive interpretation. The city set out to develop a sense of place along the river.

Collaborative learning techniques prepared passage workshop participants for successful dialogue.

As a first step in the process, the interpretive plan built upon place-based topics along the Mississippi River, including Dakota place names. With gathering places along the river spanning centuries, storytelling was the perfect fit for collecting feedback from surrounding neighborhoods. But, as you likely know from your last wedding toast or first date, not everyone is a natural born storyteller. For some, the mere thought of speaking up in a crowd is enough to render palms clammy and cold—yet these individuals' memories are no less valid or worth recording.

To ease community members into the storytelling process, we employed a collaborative learning technique called think-pair-share. Individual activity charts jumpstarted the process, helping participants organize their thoughts about stories related to potential interpretive topics. Responses were often personal. One participant shared that she takes her teenage daughter and her friends to the river to reflect on what it means to be a woman. Another talked about his experience looking for an accessible area to bring his wife, who has limited mobility. As the conversations flowed, we asked participants to place their post-it note stories on a map of the passage. This visual aid highlighted the value of all contributions and helped the team understand how stories connect across the river corridor. Finally, the participants shared their ideas in a large group.

After participating in the workshops, community members were provided instructions and materials to lead their own storytelling events in informal, public spaces.

A brainstorming activity called "My Wish For…," available at 880cities. org, inspired our next step in the process. We called them lemonade stands, evoking another natural place for neighbors to stop and chat. Using a map of the passage, park users at the lemonade stands shared their stories with trained volunteer facilitators.

One wrote, "In 1965, during the big floods my neighbor and I went to the river to see the flood." At a different event, a child drew her bike and placed the post-it by the river. By transferring our authority to community members and training them as facilitators, we reached beyond the formal workshop space into public spaces, including festivals, trails, and community gatherings. Ultimately, our focus redirected beyond 10 initial topics generated in the master plan to 21 new topics from the collection of over 200 community stories.

An open-ended approach to dialogue provided community leaders with the ability to establish—and adapt—the rules for their own engagement.

Joining the Conversation as Listeners

In Virginia, another community engagement process provided the mechanism to shift the paradigm of a historic site and empower a new audience of local stakeholders. Leadership at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, a retreat home and plantation, recognized the need to secure a stronger future. This included reaching wider audiences and building lasting relationships within their local community of Lynchburg. Yet there was a profound disconnect between existing interpretation on

architectural history and the absent stories of enslaved people who lived and worked there. The process for developing a master interpretive plan included the facilitation of public forums with staff and members of the local African American community. Together, we needed to confront challenging issues about Thomas Jefferson's complex legacy—a visionary in the freedom of humankind, yet a slave owner. A critical step in this process was building trust.

Outreach with African American community members meant going directly to the source to listen and learn.

With such a significant shift, even a strategic workshop location has potential to symbolize a new direction for an institution. While many interpretive planning workshops are held at the site of the future exhibits, we went directly to the community, rather than expecting the community to come to Poplar Forest. Lynchburg's Legacy Museum of African American History proved to be a critical partner in this process, not only hosting the event, but helping to build a network of stakeholders and spread the word. In turn, these leaders were front and center in the workshop itself.

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To encourage active participation and clarify key issues, we organized participants into small groups. The groups discussed and revised ground rules at the beginning of the session, addressing potential conflicts. By working on the rules collaboratively, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation suggests that groups can create a safe space for different views to be expressed. Importantly, at the Legacy Museum it was expected that participants could safely express emotions such as anger or pain within an agreed-upon framework of respect and honesty. Positioning our partners as leaders of group discussion also

opened the door for small groups to rephrase our prepared questions, allowing each group to reimagine Poplar Forest in new, different ways. By design, this approach also welcomed interpretive planners, staff, and other content experts into the dynamic community of learners, only stepping in as needed to facilitate the conversation. Reflecting on the experience, one cultural planner later shared, "It was time for us to listen."

Taking Action and Changing Course

There is a false expectation—one that I'm guilty of perpetuating as a young exhibit developer—that community members show up to outreach sessions ready to dive into big ideas and share personal experiences (enthusiasm is hardly ever the problem!). Yet while some individuals arrive experienced, not all have the skills to be successful in this endeavor. It's not always an easy or natural task—even for the seasoned planners and interpreters among us—to sit down and talk with
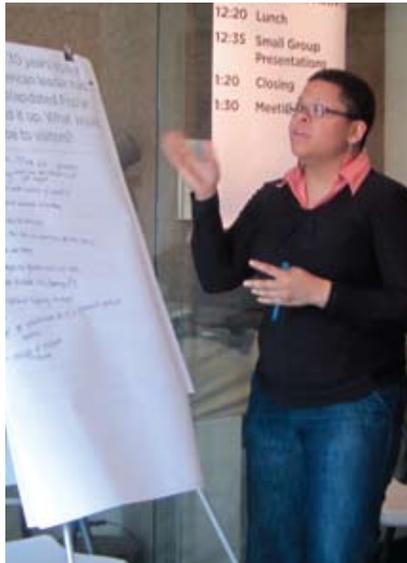
Participant Leslie King speaks at a workshop organized at Lynchburg's Legacy Museum.

one another, to be vulnerable, and to build trust among strangers. However, building capacity in the community shapes the direction of interpretation and future programming in essential ways. Importantly, what you do with

feedback impacts the strength of your relationships and moves engagement beyond token partnerships. We need to be prepared to change course from planning to implementation. To me, that is the true meaning of respect.

For More Information

Adiar, B., B. Filene, and L. Koloski, eds. *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World.* Left Coast Press, Inc. 2011.

Freire, P. 1968. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* 30th anniversary edition. Bloomsbury Academic.

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