

# interpreter

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## Educating for Excellence in Historic Interpretation

*Bob Birney, vice president of the Division of Education, Preservation, and Research, talked to all interpreters during this winter's Core Curriculum. We asked him if we could print his remarks.*

It is my purpose in these remarks to offer guidelines for achieving excellence in the task of educating people to interpret historic sites to the public. I offer these suggestions to stimulate your own thinking about this question. A recent analysis of the service profile of our interpreters shows a sizable proportion has been with us for three to four years, an even larger proportion has been with us for more than ten years, and the remainder occupying the four- to ten-year middle range. Our interpreters mirror our adult visitors for age, sex, education, and experience with Colonial Williamsburg. Therefore, you are a most unusual student body. Yet I know you would all agree that your efforts to learn more to tell the public are unending, and there is nothing as tiresome and boring for the interpreter and the visitor as an aging interpretation from yesteryear. Education for excellent interpretation requires constancy, attention, and, above all, enjoyment.

Not long ago I shared with the master teachers some of my observations about what I thought best described their task of providing first-rate training for all of you. Bill has invited me to share these ideas with you.

We call it the Department of Interpretive Education. Education embraces a number of terms. I wish to consider just two of them—training and study. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* is obviously puzzled by the word training and I quote "I. the act, process, or method of one who trains. II. State of being trained." No help there. Let me try to extract meaning for the word "training" from its uses. Children are trained. Novices seek training

programs. The military gives training. And as Webster observes, you can be *in* training in athletics.

I would submit that training is a useful word because it points to a certain kind of educational situation. I think the key lies in the fact that we have trainers and trainees. Oddly enough, not many of the trainers are so identified. Those who train animals and athletes are called trainers. Most of the true trainers in our society are called something else—coaches, masters, supervisors, and, occasionally, teachers. (However, I shall not address teachers as trainers.) Instead I wish to come back to the fact that most trainers have trainees.

Trainees are usually thought of as novices. A novice is somebody who wants to learn, knows a negligible amount of what is to be learned, and, we hope, is willing to be trained. Now at that point I think you would agree that the largest training establishment in the world has probably always been the military. They practically monopolize the word because everyone understands that when you join the military you will be trained. If we look at the military training situation, we immediately begin to get a sense of what stands at the heart of the idea of the training relationship between the trainer and the trainee. The trainee, willingly or unwillingly, volunteer or draftee, understands that the situation requires above all obedience, attention, and a high level of motivation to attempt the performance being sought by the trainer. Trainers seem to face two kinds of situations. One is a selective situation where it is understood that many are called but few will meet the standards of training. Piloting aircraft, operat-

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ing sophisticated equipment, certain types of medical work—these are understood to be sufficiently demanding and important that a very high level minimum performance is set, and large numbers of people are processed through the training program in order to get a *few* people who can do the job.

If we step back and ask what characterizes the performance they are trying to bring their trainees to, I am struck by what I will call its convergent character. I mean by that that for many of the tasks I have been describing, there is one right way, or at best a very few right ways to perform the task, and indeed there is not a whole lot of latitude for variation in performance if the task is to operate an exotic piece of machinery, execute the mechanics of a particular performance, meet certain treatment requirements in a medical situation, and so forth.

There is another side to training where the trainer is not told that his task is to produce an elite who can perform at a difficult level, but rather his task is to see to it that a mass of people acquire the basics. And so we distinguish between basic training and advanced training. Trainers who are expected to handle basic training are expected to get everyone in their unit up to standard with only a few exceptions permitted. Driver training is an example of this kind of thing where presumably driver training schools are said to be excellent if they can teach anybody the rudiments of good basic driving.

How do we describe an excellent trainer? Such instructors maintain the trainee's motivation using a variety of techniques. They have sophisticated analytic skills as they follow the trainee's efforts. They usually follow a sequence of instruction that permits progressive building on what the trainee is doing well. They know how to set goals the trainee can reach in ascending order of difficulty. They try to modulate the effort required so the trainee has a sustained sense of progress, even if it is partial and unintegrated for awhile. Somehow they combine patience with demand for improvement.

Both these roles lead to a kind of sophistication over time and situations. Experienced trainers and trainees meet for yet another round of training, quickly size each other up, adjust to each other, and get the job done. Opera singers and voice coaches, professional

golfers consulting their old pro, experienced computer programmers and the representative of the newest equipment are all examples.

What does it take to be a good trainee? I suggested a little earlier that good trainees, first of all, are willing to undergo training. They value it. Secondly I would observe that good trainees concentrate very hard on what they are being offered, and they inhibit and restrain any tendencies they may have to raise questions about the training itself. The best trainees are people who willingly place themselves in the hands of the trainer. The poorest trainees are those who persist in believing that they can actually learn the skill or the task without help from a trainer and/or that they can improve on what the trainer is doing. When we describe trainee behavior in this way, there is a great temptation to speculate as to whether or not some personalities are born trainees, others are born trainers, and others are born otherwise. I have no intention of pursuing that line of speculation except to comment that it is almost impossible to grow up in this society without being a trainee several times in the course of your life, and that being a successful trainee probably does involve learning certain habits of frustration tolerance, so that even if you don't have faith in the trainer you must still act like a good trainee to maximize your benefits. Obviously it's better to be a volunteer than a draftee. So is our Department of Interpretive Education engaged in training?

Before addressing that question, I wish to put a second term in front of you. That term is "study." Obviously if trainees train, we would expect students to study. The same dictionary is able to do much more with this word. Instead of two definitions it offers seven. Making our way through these, I would suggest we are interested in the following "application of the mental faculties to the acquisition of knowledge," or "a careful examination or analysis of a phenomenon, development, or question." Of course they can't resist "the activity or work of a student." And then there are more specialized definitions.

Once again I would suggest that they are missing the mark although this first definition points us in the right direction. What happens if you subject a particular phenomenon to a long and careful analysis? Well, the answer perhaps best lies in the observation that the

more one studies a field and the more one learns about the field, the more interesting the questions become that can be put to the field. I said earlier that the implication of training is that you finally master one of the several right ways of doing things. I believe that the implication of study is that if you carry it on long enough you become a scholar, and scholars are people with a great breadth of comprehension and knowledge which they succeed year by year in expanding. Therefore, if one initiates studies and becomes a student, the implication is that there is no end to it.

There is a second implication, too. And that is that as one masters the techniques of study, there is a progressive divergence of possibility, an opening up of creativity, if you will, a capacity for seeing things from more and more perspectives, of producing a wider and wider range of questions and weaving the answers to those questions into an ever larger understanding of the subject at hand. If we look at educational situations and ask ourselves what we expect somebody to get out of his educational efforts, it makes a big difference whether we think he is a trainee or a student. Just as all of us have had the experience of being trainees, many of us have been given the opportunity to become students. Students, too, have to be highly motivated. They, too, have to want to learn, but unlike the trainee, the student is increasingly in charge of his own educational program. The student increasingly generates his study for himself.

Earlier I shied away from calling a teacher a trainer. Obviously I hold a teacher should face students and not trainees. What do we expect from a good teacher? First of all, one teaches by personal example, whether intentionally or not. Successful teachers are curious, probing, analytical, and always projecting a sense of wanting to know more, of informing others so as to set up for them important questions. Teachers listen to students, reward inquiry, and demand *study*. They challenge thought of poor quality, expose trivial questions, and, above all, hold the student intellectually responsible for personal utterance in speech and writing. Somehow they combine compassion with rigorous standards.

Not surprisingly there are fewer students than trainees in the world, which is a pity because study is much more personally rewarding than training. And oddly enough,

there is a greater likelihood that study can be self-taught, and no question that once mastered, the arts of study sustain self-education.

Now I may have exaggerated this distinction between being a trainee and being a student, but I honestly don't think I've exaggerated it much. I do think there is an enormous amount of confusion in our institutions of higher learning about the balance between these two rather distinct educational activities. I think that people who try desperately to prepare themselves for a job are defining their opportunities in trainee terms. They may be doing themselves a great disservice if they're going to find themselves in jobs in which self-instruction on the job is the way to success. At any rate, we do have to ask what happens, finally, on the job as a consequence of training and study.

Here, I think, the results are fairly clear. For interpretation, at least, someone whose effort never gets much beyond that of a good trainee is probably going to perform for our visitors in fairly stereotyped ways. On the other hand, those who have combined their training with serious efforts to study the history of the colonial capital in all its many forms should be people who are constantly increasing what they can tell our visitors.

If we turn and look at the way the Department of Interpretive Education has structured what they now offer, we find that there is a Core Curriculum devoted to basics, which it is expected everyone will master. That's especially true of the impressive amount of time that constitutes preliminary interpretive education and other types of training before an individual is sent to an interpretive station for the first time. Having made their way through the Core Curriculum, however, the department is increasingly offering a wide range of electives so that those fields that are newly researched and newly developed are available to you for formal study. And finally, opportunities are being offered for expanded range of work stations, specialization, and, in the long run, editorial comment and critique of various interpretations you may choose to try.

I can assure you that all of this effort appeared without any instruction from myself. There is a natural order in creating educational programs that combines training and study.

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Where in our interpretive situations do we require training? Obviously we require it in communication skills and in interpersonal skills in dealing with the public. These are skills that can be learned even by the shyest and most inhibited among us to say nothing of those of us who don't know when to keep quiet. We certainly do have a large body of valid information that we expect everyone to master. In that sense, it takes a sizable amount of training to get all of this material straight. But, with that accomplished, one's study is ready to begin, and study follows along lines of personal interest and personal temperament. You never have to justify your interest in some particular part of the story.

Study is flexible—study leads to comprehension—study means that even if you don't know the answer to the visitor's question as put, you can still respond to the question in a way that is helpful to the inquirer despite the fact that you can't provide a definite answer. Now because we are all here to provide this experience to our visitors, I have been concentrating on how training and study, which in my title I call education, serve the visitor. But there is a marvelous payoff in all of this that isn't talked about very much. To the extent that you serve the visitors well, the chief beneficiary of that achievement is yourself. There is simply nothing as satisfying as achieving confidence, a breadth of understanding, achieving a command, if you will, of a body of material. It's a resource that you can always use for your own pleasure and the pleasure of others. It leads to acquaintanceship with a wide network of people who have interests similar to yours and who are a resource to you to help you grow, to edit your work, to give you the critiques that have to come from somebody else if you want to get better. Earlier I referred to the unusual profile of our interpretive group. Obviously we have a lot of people for whom the most productive role of the moment is trainee. But we also have a great many people who long since became students. If the Department of Interpretive Education is going to do its job, it has to provide for the education of you all. And so it is for that reason that I think we are moving in the right direction of the kind of combined profile of instruction that's being offered here in these programs.

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## Occurrences

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With the arrival of spring in Colonial Williamsburg come many of our evening program offerings for visitors. Eighteenth-century plays will be performed on Saturday nights, and on March 21 the Evening of Military Life will begin its spring season. On March 25 the Sunday evening Capitol Concerts begin, and the Palace Concerts will return Thursday evenings beginning April 5.

The Fifes and Drums, Militia, and Virginia State Garrison Regiment begin their regular season of Review programs on Tuesday, March 13, and Retreat programs on Friday, March 23, at 5:15 p.m. Special Review programs will be presented April 21 and May 28 at 8:30 a.m. for the Easter and Memorial Day holiday weekends. On May 15 the military units will begin the Prelude to Independence with a special program at the Capitol and will continue to observe this Independence celebration with Salutes to States on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 5:15 p.m. until July 4.

Other special events include Canada Time from March 10 through March 25. The Garden Symposium begins on April 8.

Remember that your employee pass admits you to all the evening programs. We hope you take advantage of it. Check your copy of the "Visitor's Companion" and join our visitors in evening entertainments and special programs.

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