

SPECIAL MISSION OF TEACHING HERITAGE INTERPRETATION IN POST-SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

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This article describes the very first heritage interpretation course at Belarusian State University (BSU) which was launched in 2014. It is based on innovative democratic approaches and principles. In frame of the course students were shown best practices in interpretation and involved in creating individual interpretation programs. There is a result of research based on students' feedback.

Keywords: heritage; interpretation; mission; education; democratic values

Heritage interpretation is absolutely new sphere of activity and knowledge which entering post-soviet countries including Belarus. It attracts a lot of interest among tourism stakeholders.

In Belarusian tourism while developing excursions and tourism programs soviet stereotypes are still playing the dominant role. From the early days of the USSR, excursions were a tool to instill a certain type of behavior. Dialogs, pluralism, even any initiative to provide your own opinion were not allowed. It always used to be a monolog – one-side communication. Huge amount of information was provided in order to sweep any doubts and questions aside. There was only one right opinion – the one provided by a guide. Usually entertainment side was missing as well.

It has been almost 25 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is no longer that powerful ideological machine that could support such approaches ideologically and financially. All these approaches and stereotypes are not effective right now, consequently, there is no demand for them.

The generations are changing, and now we can see young people with different needs. There is only one way to attract younger generation's attention – to create completely new tourism product based on heritage, which will be able to compete with social networks, modern entertainment parks, clubs, parties, etc.

The situation is completely opposite in western countries. There are a lot of organizations whose main activity is to work with nature and culture heritage. They used interpretive approach for many years. The following can be mentioned: national parks (National Park Service of US exists since 1916), other nature protection territories, museums, historical villages and farms, farmsteads, zoos, safari parks, camps, resorts, entertainment parks, tour operators, industrial heritage objects, NGOs, management and self-management bodies, etc. All of them have contributed to popularization of interpretation and turning it into a profession.

During several decades in the interpretive guides' community of western countries, mainly USA, it has been widely discussed whether interpretation is a profession and if it is so, is there a necessity of official recognition? There are different opinions concerning the issue. One of them – interpretation is going to be a profession in the future. Other opinion is that interpretation has already become a profession. And the third one says that interpretation is too wide and interdisciplinary to be combined into one type of professional occupation.

Interpretation already possesses many characteristics, which are necessary for a profession: own ideology and terminology, sort of standards, permanent quality control, trainings and educational programs, opportunities, connection with practical experience, acknowledgment from other disciplines.

From our point of view, interpretation is bigger and wider than just a profession. It is possible to say that today exists some kind of non-formal Professional Code which is commonly acceptable. In order to become a profession, interpretation needs to possess clearly developed professional standards, qualifications and job descriptions. Meanwhile, it is of primary importance that interpretation doesn't conflict with other professions. That's why on the current stage of becoming a profession, it would be more logical to consider interpretation as a special kind of ideology with its own system of opinions, values, approaches. This makes interpretation bigger and higher than just a profession. We can speak about it as a special sign of quality.

Usually, positions' name connected with interpretation sounds like Interpretive Ranger, Interpretive Manager, Interpretive Designer, Interpretive Planner, etc. Interpretation often acts as an adjective, which is linked to traditional profession or position. Nevertheless, there is no way it diminishes interpretation, otherwise it demonstrates special value and its universal character. It is some kind of added value, superior quality, spirituality, which provide professional competitive advantage. This is what differs a regular guide from a professional one, just a trip from unforgettable excursion, an ordinary museum or national park from outstanding museum or national park.

National Association of Interpretation (NAI) has even been producing a special T-shirt of interpreters which describes many roles or functions of interpreters. It contains a little bit of humor but it is very true. Obviously, there are various types of professional activities in the list – historian, ranger, teacher, tour guide, etc. There are so called 'missionary' activities, the main characteristic is a mission: protector, inspirer, leader, interpreter, teacher. Interpreters try to combine all these activities, in order to implement one of the most important ideological functions of interpretation, aimed at creating new environmentally conscious mind and responsible behavior. It is obvious that interpretation is not just a profession. It is more like a mission.

Any professional activity, especially, activity connected with mission and its own ideology, needs to have an educational system. There is a range of interpretive educational programs, trainings, seminars offered in the USA. Few intellectual centers define the main development tendencies of the interpretive activity. This is first of all, the National Park Service (USA), National Association for Interpretation (USA) and some higher institution facilities:

The University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, Michigan State University, The University of Idaho, The University of San Diego (California), etc. These are places where principal materials, programs, books are prepared; all of it will become interpretation basis later on. It is the place where new approaches are being developed in order to meet the needs of society.

Today, Interpreters can get a professional education in more than 130 university programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels in North America. Several universities in Europe, Australia, and Asia also offer interpretation courses. Teaching of interpretation has a long history. Some undergraduate interpretation courses cover a broad overview of the philosophy, principles, and methods of interpretation and environmental education. Others build on these general concepts and require numerous exercises to develop students' individual performance skills in different styles of interpretive presentations. The interpretive profession has long debated whether a strong grounding in communication or expertise in specific resource subject matter (e.g., forestry, natural science, archaeology, history) is more important. In fact, the work requires depth in both subject matter and delivery theory and skills [1].

The situation in Belarus and in other post soviet countries is different and heritage interpretation is on the initial stage of development. Even term "interpretation" is unknown to wide public. The first book about interpretation in Russian "Heritage Interpretation in Tourism: New Approaches in Experience Economy Era", Valeria Klitsounova was published in 2015 and the first few trainings including one with Interpret Europe in 2016 have been introduced. The Belarusian NGO "Country Escape" is an institution responsible for promoting these new ideas in Belarus. Very first course on heritage interpretation has appeared at BSU.

Also there are private initiatives based on interpretive principles – Museum of rural culture "Dudutky", private ecomuseums, thematic tourism programs, festivals, etc. They were designed mainly on intuitional level without theoretical knowledge. They proved efficiency of interpretive approaches and attract big interest from tourist's side. We may say that tourism stakeholders demonstrate its interest and use more and more interpretive ideas.

Why is it happening now? There are three reasons for that:

- there is a demand for new innovative ideas in tourism industry which provide for tourism products/services competitive advantage and create added value in hospitality industry;
- there is active well-educated audience – new generation (who use Internet and travel around the globe). They are able to use these new ideas and implement them;
- new institutions have appeared and sort of network for spreading these new ideas has established. NGO 'Country Escape' and BSU were the first ones of them.

Why is it happening in tourism industry? Because it is the most dynamic sector of economy based mainly on private companies looking for new innovative ideas. Many young people decided to work in this field.

Heritage interpretation is an absolutely new academic discipline in higher education of post-socialist countries. There are only few universities where

you can find such course and Belarusian State University is one of them. The course exists since 2014 as a discipline on International Tourism Department – 52 hours (Table 1). The name of the course is “Cultural and Natural Heritage Interpretation in Tourism”.

From the very beginning was a problem how to attract students to this course with the title which tells them not too much. The basic term “interpretation” is unknown. There is not profession like that in our country, there is no clear understanding of the word “interpretation”.

To make the course attractive for students we developed “5I” model when designing it. The course should be Innovative, Inspiring, Interesting, Interactive, Interdisciplinary what makes it very interesting and creative.

Then we used ASK model (*Attitude, Skills, Knowledge*) to form the content of the course. It should be rather universal and match to any future profession. We wanted to create a new *Attitude* among students (to teach them to have their own opinion, express it free, care about and care for heritage, to be more responsible and etc.). We planned to develop new *Skills* (how communicate with each other, how to conduct dialogs, how to present information in most efficient way, how to be creative). We tried to enlarge students’ *Knowledge* (to introduce new concept, history and principles of interpretation). The course is based on innovative democratic approaches and principles.

Table 1

Program of the course “Cultural and Natural Heritage Interpretation in Tourism” (BSU, Minsk)

Topic 1	The cultural and natural heritage in tourism and creative economy
Topic 2	Cultural and natural heritage interpretation – main principles
Topic 3	Interpretation of cultural heritage in tourism: theory and best practices
Topic 4	Interpretation of the natural heritage in tourism: theory and best practices
Topic 5	Intangible heritage interpretation’s features in tourism: theory and best practices
Topic 6	Using best techniques of interpretation in communications
Topic 7	Ecomuseums as a form of cultural and natural heritage interpretation
Topic 8	Greenways as an innovative approach in cultural and natural heritage interpretation
Topic 9	The quests as a modern form of cultural and natural heritage interpretation
Topic 10	How to design tourism products using interpretive techniques

Note: own elaboration.

The course provides basic knowledge about history, principles, best practices of interpretation (topic 1-5), introduces different techniques in communication (topic 6), gives some practical skills in tourism product creation (topic 7-10). And as a result it inspires students to make their own presentations in the end of the course.

During presentation other students are supposed to make evaluation according to special form, where they give their grades according to certain cri-

teria. All presentations should be creative, use some arts, open new meanings of resources. Program have clear theme, from 5 till 7 subthemes, clear structure with POW! Introduction, bridge, interesting body, transitions and inspiring conclusion (Buchholz J.).

There was wide variety of students' programs: during past years ones dedicated to Belarusian folklore and rites; Belarusian cuisine, how survive in Belarusian forests, Belarusian legends and even Eskimos icehouse (igloo). Sometimes we make open presentation for other groups which was like interesting show.

After course a sort of survey has been conducted (Table 2). The answers demonstrate that they considerate course as really innovative, interesting, creative and rather universal for students.

Table 2

**Typical answers from questionnaire for students who attended the course
"Interpretation of Cultural and Natural Heritage"
(group 2016/2017)**

<p>1. Was the course interesting and why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The course was very interesting, because the interpretation is really something new and unusual for the Belarusian tourism. • The material is easier to digest by using visual interpretation in video clips. • Constant discussions, video presentations, speeches of colleagues... The contact between the audience and the lecturer created a working and creative atmosphere.
<p>2. Where can you use the acquired knowledge and skills?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think that the acquired knowledge can be applied in all spheres of life. • The course taught to fearlessly speak to people regardless of the information being presented. • We acquired the necessary knowledge (oratory, logical and creative thinking, methods of attracting attention, conducting dialogue). • The places of use of the acquired skills are as diverse as the acquired knowledge. From ordinary communication with colleagues, to speaking at conferences and diplomatic receptions. • In any field of activity, since in our time it is very important to look at things under a different (new!) angle. • The course taught to fearlessly speak to people regardless of the information being presented. And it's also interesting to present even quite boring topics at first glance.
<p>3. Has it helped to improve communication skills? If so, how?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This course helped improve the skill of public speaking. Before I was categorically afraid of any performance, even in front of familiar people. • Fear of the stage and public appearances has gone. The course also helped in conducting the dialogue between the orator and the student. • We learned how to sharpen the listeners' attention so that they remember a lot from what has been said. • Several techniques can be used in public speaking, in interaction with the interested public, in daily communication in an informal setting.

<p>4. What would you advise for improvement?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The course is pretty interesting, so there are no much wishes. • The course is composed interestingly and not boringly, using a lot of video material, as well as interesting presentations. But still I would like to see more concrete examples of the use of interpretation. • Creating outside excursions or taking participation in conferences.
<p>5. Did it help to develop creativity? Have you discovered something new in yourself?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I believe that the course helped to develop not only creativity, but also taught each of us to look at things from a completely different angle. • Helped to understand that in fact we are all creative in one way or another. It was fun and interesting to prepare the project at the end of the semester. • The course certainly added a bit of creativity, because you had to look at things from a different angle, which was not familiar to me.

Note: own elaboration.

Normally in our post-soviet education system students are taught to remember things and then repeat it. The course “Cultural and Natural Heritage Interpretation in Tourism” introduces other approach. Students should find their own opinion, respect different views, look at resources from different angles, look for different meanings and revelations. As a result the course introduces and promotes democratic value. It is like special mission for teachers and students, to inspire and make them ambassadors of the great activity – heritage interpretation.

Reference list:

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