

## **Interpreting Difficult Stories: Principles for the application of hot interpretation**

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“Hot interpretation” is a term coined by David Uzzell, to refer to interpretation that uses emotive and challenging content to prompt visitors to re-examine their own beliefs and perceptions regarding social, environmental, or moral issues. In this paper, we explore the use of hot interpretation at an exhibition in the State Library of Queensland that depicted the history of forced removals of Aboriginal children from their families in the early to mid-twentieth century – often referred to as the “Stolen Generations”.

Based on this research, we have identified five principles that may serve to guide the application of hot interpretation techniques when dealing with controversial and emotional issues:

### **1. Narrative and personal storytelling should occupy a central place in hot interpretation and should provide multiple points of personal connection with visitors.**

For the majority of participants, personal accounts or stories provided by those who lived through the Stolen Generations experience left the largest impression. Highlighting the similarities between the visitor and the storyteller helped to develop empathy and allowed visitors to imagine themselves in the place of the other and to develop an understanding of their situation. Visitors are often drawn to exhibits containing diaries and personal letters for example, because these things help visitors connect with another’s feelings.

### **2. Despair should be balanced with hope, providing visitors with a way to deal with their feelings and move forward.**

A number of participants commented on the feelings of sadness and anger, guilt and shame the exhibition had aroused. However, for the majority of visitors, the sadness and anger felt over the events depicted were balanced with feelings of hope and admiration for the Aboriginal people. In particular, participants discussed the resilience of Aboriginal people in their ability to survive in the face of such extreme adversity and hardship. When the topic or event being interpreted is likely to be distressing to visitors, providing a balancing, positive perspective may help to provide visitors with a way of dealing with their feelings and find a way forward.

### **3. Presentation of historical evidence and balanced interpretation should leave visitors feeling educated, rather than persuaded.**

Mostly, visitors considered the exhibition to be educational, and supported its role in bringing these issues to the attention of the public. Supplementing personal stories with historical detail in official government documents and letters was one way that the exhibition approached this. The use of official documents “authenticated” the experiences of the individuals being interpreted. However, some participants felt that the exhibition had tried to be too persuasive. If the perception of balance is lost, the educational value of the exhibition will likely be diminished.

**4. Providing a place or space for reflection should encourage visitors to personalize and internalize their learning.**

The Visitor Response Wall was an important aspect of the exhibition because it allowed visitors to consider and reflect on the exhibition content in relation to their own lives and also allowed them to become a part of the exhibition. One possible complication, however, is that visitors' comments may not be in keeping with the balanced approach taken by the exhibit designers. This is clearly something that needs to be considered carefully by the institution.

**5. Focusing on the past to inform the future should provide visitors with a way of learning from the mistakes of others and contribute to building a better future for all.**

Just as it is important to balance a sense of despair with hope, so it is important to focus not only on the past but also on the future. How can visitors make sense of distressing events and learn something that will be of value in their own lives? Participants in this study acknowledged that an understanding of the past should lead to better decisions in the future.

**Note:** This article is drawn from a more detailed discussion of the study which is published as:

Ballantyne, R., Packer, J., and Bond, N., (2012). Interpreting shared and contested histories: The *Broken Links* Exhibition. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 55 (2), 153-166.