

# Social / Cultural Sciences



## Building an NPS training program in interpretation through distance learning

By Elizabeth R. Barrie and Katie L. Bliss

### A training chasm

“APPROXIMATELY 70,000 PRACTITIONERS work in partnership with the National Park Service to deliver interpretation and education services to the public,” according to the *NPS Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan* (National Park Service 2006). However, “only 3,000 of this workforce currently participate in interpretation and education training” (National Park Service 2006). A gap in training that encompasses 67,000 people creates vast challenges for maintaining and upholding professional standards. New tools—built on an interpretation and

**Figure 1 (above right).** Online courses are self-paced, with three levels of completion available: self study, basic certificate of completion, and advanced certificate of completion.

**Figure 2 (above left).** Interpretive coaches assess site-based activities before an advanced certificate of completion can be awarded.

education training platform that has evolved over the years—are beginning to address this challenge.

As early as 1994, the NPS Division of Interpretation and Education defined competencies for interpretation in the parks. In 2004, using the Multipurpose Occupational Systems Analysis Inventory–Close-Ended (MOSAIC) methodology, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) validated 13 competencies integral to the delivery of interpretation and education services:



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- Knowledge of the Resource
- Knowledge of the Audience
- Knowledge of Appropriate Techniques
- Informal Visitor Contacts
- Interpretive Talk
- Conducted Activity
- Illustrated Program or Demonstration
- Interpretive Writing
- Curriculum-based Education Program
- Interpretive Planning
- Interpretive Media Development
- Interpretive Training and Coaching
- Interpretive Research

The MOSAIC process incorporated input from interpreters at multiple pay (i.e., GS or general schedule) levels who rated the competencies on several scales, including importance and requirement for entry. The rigor of this methodology ensures that the competencies can withstand legal challenges.

These competencies established professional standards for national park interpretation and education services, but did not provide the necessary training materials to reach all of the volunteers, concessioners, partners, and employees performing these services. Therefore, in 2005 the National Park Service partnered with Indiana University's Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands in order to revise the Interpretive Development Program curriculum and address this vast training gap. After a systematic review of the curriculum, the partners decided to create the Interpretation and Education Distance Learning and Credentialing Platform. This platform contains a blended curriculum based on the OPM-validated competencies.

The partners launched a pilot course in 2006, and courses on the Foundations of Interpretation (addressing the first three competencies listed above) and Informal Visitor Contacts rolled out in spring 2007. Subsequently the program has released courses on the interpretive talk, interpretive writing, conducted activities, and training and coaching. Courses on additional competencies will be released in late 2009.

The curriculum for each competency now includes (1) a competency narrative, (2) an online self-paced course, and (3) a classroom training packet. NPS partners and the public alike can access all materials at <http://www.interptraining.org>. Since the initial launch of the platform, people all over the world (e.g., China, New Zealand, the United Arab Emirates) have registered for more than 7,000 courses. Hence, the training gap is closing via a mechanism that provides park managers with flexible tools for upholding NPS interpretation and education standards, while also providing widespread access to NPS-sponsored training of OPM-certified competencies.

## Flexible learning tools

The competency narrative addresses all the information an interpreter needs to know to meet the competency standard. As trainees complete each competency narrative (typically 40–50 pages long), it becomes available on the NPS Interpretive Development Program Web site (<http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp>). The narrative serves as the source document for the rest of the curriculum materials. For each competency David Larsen, training manager for Interpretation, Education, Recreation, and Conservation located at the Stephen T. Mather Training Center in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, gathers a group of six to 10 interpreters from throughout the National Park Service to serve as subject-matter experts. Over the course of about six months, this group creates the competency narrative based entirely on the competency standard. An interpretation instructional designer at the Eppley Institute develops a draft of the online course when the competency narrative is complete. The subject-matter expert team then fine-tunes the course, conducting field tests to ensure learners can meet the competency-based course objectives.

Each online course contains (1) instructional content, (2) interactive practice sessions that provide immediate feedback, and (3) site-based activities through which participants develop an interpretive product or service. The courses are self-paced, with three levels of completion available: self study, basic certificate of completion, and advanced certificate of completion (fig. 1). Interpreters who complete the course via self study have access to all the instructional content and interactive practice sessions. They can also use the site-based activity rubrics to conduct a self-assessment of their own work. Participants must complete a knowledge assessment in order to receive a basic certificate of completion, and must have an interpretive coach (e.g., field supervisor, seasonal team leader, or concessions manager) assess their site-based activities to receive an advanced certificate of completion (fig. 2).

Staffs of the National Park Service and Eppley Institute designed the courses based on sound pedagogical principles to be used with an interpretive coach. These principles suggest that blending online with face-to-face instruction enhances learning. For instance, Brown and Corkill (2007) write, “appropriate online instruction should provide students with opportunities for active participation with the instructor.” Similarly, blended learning courses that combine online learning and face-to-face instruction are equally or more effective than completely online or completely traditional learning. Students in a blended learning course achieved the same or better learning results and were highly satisfied with the combined process (Garrison and Kanuka 2004).

Park managers can use the coaching component of the curriculum to guide the creation of interpretive products and services while developing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of park staff. In field tests of the coaching system, supervisors found that the activities in the course provided a comprehensive, structured format for addressing previously overlooked issues (e.g., professional appearance and quality customer service). Coaches employ detailed rubrics to assess the site-based activities and provide helpful advice on improving interpretive skills and abilities (fig. 3). Coaches receive extensive training, including a minimum of 24 hours of classroom work conducted by regional training

teams, before being permitted to award advanced certificates. To enhance the flexibility of the platform, participants at each site determine who should serve as a coach, though each coach must successfully complete the extensive blended learning training.

Each course contains a manual designed to assist coaches in using the online tools to meet their needs. This manual describes the spirit and intent of each activity, with tips for providing feedback. With this information interpretive coaches can ask staff to complete just one or two activities within a course; limiting the activities in this way focuses training and coaching on specific components of the competency, based on the needs of the interpreter.

In situations where individualized coaching is not feasible, peer coaching provided by site staff in a classroom setting is an option. The course materials include a classroom training packet, which provides classroom instructional content, hands-on activities, and training evaluation forms. Possible time frames are listed for each training segment, but adaptation of the materials to the specific group is encouraged.

Social scientific inquiry infused the entire curriculum revision. Katie Bliss, NPS curriculum revision coordinator, developed an online nominal group process to systematically develop the mate-

Criteria	Scoring		
	Incomplete	Needs Revision	Fully Successful
Checklist	The checklist fails to provide a realistic timeline for preparing to be on time and look professional during the talk.	The checklist contains a timeline that is incomplete or unrealistic for preparing to be on time and look professional when delivering a talk.	The checklist contains a complete and realistic timeline for preparing to be on time and look professional when delivering a talk.
Flexibility	The strategies for dealing with the potential challenges to delivering an effective talk are inadequate.	The strategies for dealing with the potential challenges to delivering an effective talk could be improved and/or they are lacking detail.	The strategies for dealing with the potential challenges to delivering a talk are well reasoned and would be effective.
Audience Comfort	The comfort of the audience has not been addressed.	An attempt was made to create plans for providing for the comfort of the audience, but important details are missing.	The comfort of the audience has been completely addressed.
Speaking Skills	A way to improve speaking skills has not been identified.	A plan for enhancing speaking skills has been developed, but essential elements are missing.	A detailed plan for enhancing speaking skills has been developed.
Responsiveness	The responsiveness strategy has not been identified and/or the strategy is not responsive.	The identified responsiveness strategy is incomplete and needs improvement.	The identified responsiveness strategy is complete and would be effective.

**Figure 3.** Coaches use detailed rubrics such as this example from the Interpretive Talk course to assess the site-based activities and provide helpful advice on improving interpretive skills and abilities.

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rials for the foundations course. We sent the call for participation in the process to 350 chiefs of interpretation, all seven regional chiefs of interpretation, and 226 past and present peer review certifiers. A total of 69 participants responded and contributed course content (Bliss 2006). Additionally, the instructional-design team incorporated Merrill's (2002) first principles of instruction, which developed from an analysis of instructional design theories in the field of instructional systems technology.

## Fulfilling the mission

By meeting professional standards for interpretive services, interpreters enhance visitor experiences and inspire public support for park management in fulfilling the dual mandate of conservation and visitor enjoyment. With the creation of the Interpretation and Education Distance Learning and Credentialing Program, park managers have new, flexible tools to ensure that all park staff, volunteers, and concessioners who interact with the public are trained to NPS interpretation standards. NPS staff in operations as diverse as facility management, visitor services, and resource protection now have equal access to interpretation training, which will help them inspire visitors to learn about and, in turn, care for park resources. In addition, resource managers who participate in the courses gain a useful foundation for collaboration with interpreters and educators, specifically to engender public support for resource management initiatives through effective presentations, articles, press releases, and exhibits and to build powerful interpretation/education components into resource stewardship plans, initiatives, and funding requests (<http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/theprogram.htm#resmgt>).

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