

# TaleTours

Jo Henwood

[jo7hanna@optusnet.com.au](mailto:jo7hanna@optusnet.com.au)  
040 88 75 137

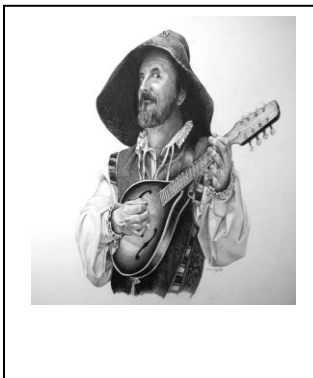


## Aims

- To demonstrate the application of storytelling in an adult public program.
- To showcase a partnership project between a heritage organisation, the NSW National Trust, and a community arts organization, the Storytelling Guild of NSW.
- To introduce the concept of a TaleTour
- To describe the rewards and challenges of a TaleTour
- To outline how a TaleTour can be established, modified for different audiences, and maintained

## Storytelling in ILEs

Storytelling is such a great word that it is frequently used by novelists, actors, artists, directors, guides and sign writers. However, using a sequence of events, or referring to characters, emotions or situations, does not necessarily make your activity storytelling.



Traditional storytelling is (usually) one performer performing a narrative to an audience, involving them in the flow of actions and relationships, following a character's emotional journey and transformation to a conclusion.

Informal learning environments are therefore a very natural site for storytelling because:

- Every heritage site exists because it has significance to our culture due to what exists there, happened there, or lived there. All of what is significant can be communicated in the form of stories.
- Storytelling by one performer is a direct personal means of communication, (the essence of interpretation as connecting people and what is significant to the site) and can be modified in the telling according to audience needs.
- Storytelling builds on the oral communication skills guides already use.

- Since it only requires the internal resources of a storyteller, it is inexpensive to produce, whilst having maximum impact.
- Storytelling operates simultaneously on multiple emotional and intellectual layers, and so can reach audiences of different educational standards, ages, and levels of sophistication, even when they are extremely familiar with the content of the story.

Hitherto, informal learning environments have most often limited their use of storytelling to procuring individuals to tell folk and fairy tales to very young children at festivals or exhibition openings. TaleTours is one example of how stories can reach adults vigorously and appropriately.

## Partnership of the



Forging a relationship between an informal learning environment and a local community arts organization makes sense in terms of finance and community networking. The Storytelling Guild of NSW has for many years contributed to the NSW National Trust by performing stories at the annual Norman Lindsay Festival of Children's Literature.

This year we realised we remixed the ingredients we had for a more rewarding relationship, in a project which has three prongs:

- monthly storytelling concerts for adults and children at various Trust properties around Sydney
- a storytelling skills course to teach volunteers how to perform stories at these concerts
- TaleTours, so that the Trust could advertise a program through the Rocks in Sydney which would not infringe on the many other tourist programs there, but would attract tourists from hotels in the area, interpreting a precinct the Trust has access and knowledge, and which would utilise the skills of the storytelling course graduates.

## TaleTours

A TaleTour is not a conventional guided tour: its aims are not educative, and it is less concerned with the objects and facts related to them, than to the emotional associations and how they can illustrate stories.

It is a Public Program, like a concert, substituting stories for songs, concerned with the entertainment value of each story rather than its accuracy. It is a travelling performance, rather than an entertaining tour. The closest it comes to a tour is a ghost tour.

### What a TaleTour is not

It is not a series of mini lectures on topics, or biographies, and is more than using characters or anecdotes, or telling people what they should feel about those elements.

## What a TaleTour is



- A TaleTour is a series of stories told in key spots along a route.
- The stories relate to the sites either by telling about what did happen in this place, or by telling a fictional story which might have happened during a real historical event.
- Other art forms may be incorporated, most obviously music, but also drawing or the performance of skills such as cooking, dancing or forging to illustrate elements within the story.
- One storyteller or several can perform during the course of the tour
- A TaleTour is for entertainment: to engage people emotionally

## Rewards

- The interpretation is a result of emotional connections and subjective responses rather than intellectual comprehension, and so can appeal to varying audiences simultaneously. Long after facts have been forgotten, the emotional impact of characters and events will live in people's memories.
- By starting with emotions rather than knowledge, you can inspire audiences to want to know more of the background information or the facts concerning particular people or events.
- This is a way of experiencing a large outdoor site such as house gardens, an historic village or a township, or of re-presenting a small site with a limited collection
- TaleTours require preliminary research, writing, storytelling skills and knowledge of the site, but they do not require high expenditure or set up for individual tours.
- It encourages repeat visitation. Combining theatre and tours can attract visitors who have been to the site before, or tourists choosing between a multitude of experiences in the same area.
- The program can be consistently marketed, and simultaneously individualised by the different storytellers.
- This is a way of finding and using intangible culture in a public program

## Challenges

- Outdoor communication is always difficult, particularly with the subtlety and depth needed for storytelling. Storytellers struggle against the distractions of noise, crowd movements, vulnerability to weather and glare, keeping track of a group whilst leading them through a crowd, and concerns for safety and comfort.



- Storytelling is not factual. Too great a reliance on facts deadens the experience because real life has too many dull bits and inconsistencies while a good story goes for the high points to have a peak emotional payoff. It is vital that you promote the program so that people know what to expect. However, it can be a chocolate milk phenomenon (children drinking nutritious milk when it has that added flavour) that an audience will often be more interested in hearing your explanation of What Actually Happened *after* you have inspired them to care in the first place.
- Because of this, storytellers need to move the facts around, and this can be a struggle for communicators who have always been guides or teachers. For them, a reverence for truth and accuracy, a strong sense of responsibility to not tamper with the facts can make it extremely difficult to adjust to telling a story which veers away from this. It seems that training guides to be storytellers can be harder than training storytellers to be guides, because guides are already deeply enmeshed in their own communication skill bank and resist the notion that storytelling is really quite different.

### To establish a sustainable TaleTour project:

- Research historical events that happened on the site, or historical figures who are connected with it.
- Create a resource folder of these events or people. Write your own stories, by entering into what really happened, or write fictional stories based on times of history and what might have happened then. Somewhere between half a dozen and a dozen files would be good.
- Train storytellers on how to adapt material into stories and perform them
- Advertise a program in which people can book a tour where five or six stories will be told from a list of a dozen topics. For any given TaleTour a customer may request particular stories to be included, although usually people are not so specific. However, this allows for repeat visitation by those who want to hear a favourite story, or new ones.
- Devise a route where these stories can be told which is convenient, comfortable and coherent
- Explore the necessary components of a communication web
  - between the storytellers

- between the storytellers and the organization
- between the organisation and the target audience

## **Programming**

You could also approach the program from the opposite direction and think about various audiences and what they would seek: for example, what sort of stories would children enjoy at your property? Perhaps gumnut baby type fairy stories set in bushland; or if you already have a sensory tour this could provide a suitable route for a TaleTour for people with sensory impairments.

Once you have established an audience, suitable stories for them, and the best places to present these stories, the performances need to be organised appropriately.

Ways of sequencing your stories:

- Chronologically – can be helpful for people who are not familiar with history, to help reinforce the order in which things occurred but this can also be tired and predictable.
- By proximity as you walk the site. You can also sequence the order so that if two story spots are close together, you tell one story on the forward leg of the tour and one on return.
- Or arrange them as you would organise the elements of a story: the strongest story or story which has the mood which you want your audience to take away should be the last, the story which best creates the mood to engage people should be first, the deepest most thoughtful story in the middle
- Or vary the stories between light and shade, and between genres of story so that the audience never becomes jaded with the same style or mood
- Because sunsets and moonrises can change the mood of locations and suit them as story sites according to different times of the day, your sequence will reflect this, and alter according to the season
- Connect the story to express the mood or message
- Stories are performances, not just a recitation of words. Decisions need to be made about lighting, sound effects, props, and comfort and safety at different times. You also need to consider what sort of information, activities or handouts can precede or follow your tour.

No matter how much you advertise a TaleTour as being exclusively storytelling, people will inevitably ask general questions as you lead them from one story spot to another. The storyteller will therefore need some general knowledge to impart.

For story programs designed specifically for young children, preschoolers and Stage 1, the stories should have a large portion of participation: refrains of words or actions, role play, children holding props or answering questions. If you find yourself facing a group which has some of these young children, but the stories weren't designed for them, add some level of role play into it so that they will be involved, in the same way you do in general tours.

For performances for teenagers, your stories and program will be shorter and sharper. Use humour, violence, mystery, sex, and satire or references to contemporary culture. Younger teenagers particularly enjoy ghost and horror stories; others like spoofs and stories of trickery.

## Troubleshooting

Because a TaleTour is different from a general tour, and Australians have a belief system that storytelling is exclusively for tiny children, it is very important that the program is promoted to the right audience, perhaps even avoiding the word “storytelling” altogether.

Time for a discussion on the relationship between story, history and truth can fruitfully follow, as well as more information about the situations which inspired the stories.



## Research

Just as an artist has to know all the technical skills in order to let them go to create a work, so a storyteller must do the research to find out what really was happening in order to release those facts and concentrate on the story.

## Training

Because guides are so skilled in communication skills they have a lot of confidence in their ability to tell stories. However guides want to tell it all – they want to deliver tours or mini lectures on a biography, and it takes a lot of training for them to unlearn their guiding and learn to tell stories instead. For them to be trained in this you need a storyteller. Contact your local Storytelling Guild [www.AustralianStorytelling.org.au](http://www.AustralianStorytelling.org.au) to discover a storyteller who has expertise in informal learning environments to train guides in how to become storytellers.

The training course the storyteller will conduct should include:

- Vocal techniques: projection, protection, pitch, pace, volume, characterisation, pause
- Body language: facial expression, gestures, mime, movements, stage marking, characterisation
- Narrative structure
- The differences between oral and written communication and how to adapt stories from existing material
- Creating participative stories
- Enhancing performances with props, sound effects, music, lighting, and other activities
- Programming for different audiences and situations
- Using performance spaces

The traditional art of storytelling lends itself to public programs in informal learning environments for adults as well as for children. Between once upon a time and ever after, there are many stories we can tell, and many places we can tell them. A TaleTour is just one way of uniting the space, the storyteller and grownups who hunger for What Happened Next.