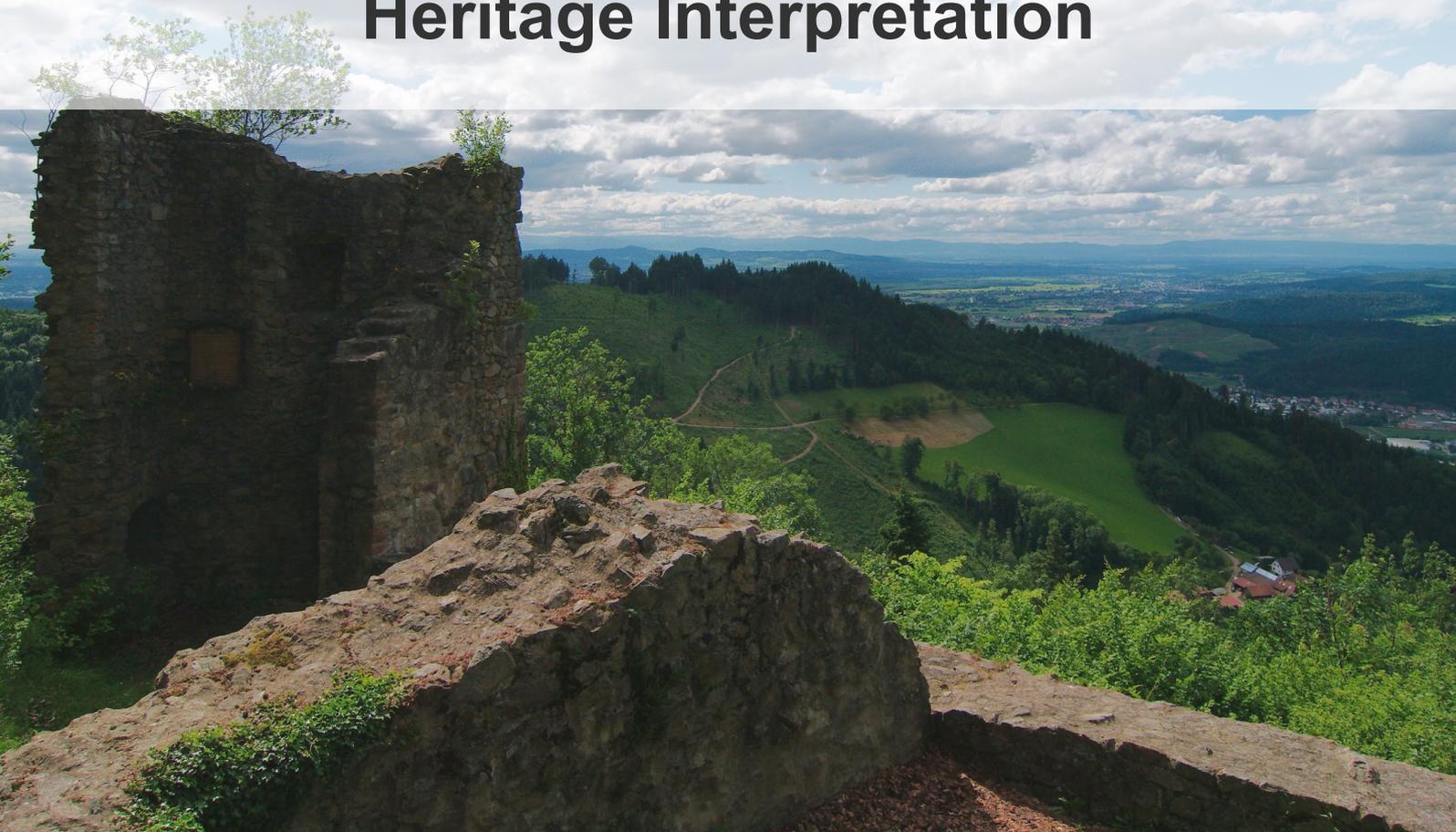


Policy recommendations for the Professional Development in the Field of Heritage Interpretation



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Title image (by P. Lehnés): transcending old borders opened up new horizons (view from the Black Forest, Germany, to the Vosges, France)



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“Sadly, men are so stupid that they rather do not learn from history; they only learn from stories which they experienced themselves.”

said the historian Christopher Clark shortly after the Brexit vote. He was baffled, not so much by the result, but by the kind of misleading arguments, half-truths and outright lies that led the populist Brexit campaign to win a majority of votes. But obviously this is not just a UK phenomenon. The rise of nationalist populism in many countries is a threat for the EU, for the Western ideal of pluralism and for European values.

This challenge was still less obvious when the InHerit project was prepared in 2012. However, some results of this multilateral project on facilitating learning from history turned out to be highly relevant in this context (more about InHerit see box on page 7). A small study explored the different modes of thinking that heritage interpretation can facilitate and what they mean for contemporary Europe and its pluralist democratic societies.¹ It led to unforeseen results:

- Interpretation in strict sense links natural or historic objects, events and places with concepts that refer to intangible entities such as freedom, life, death, respect, power, love, peace, equality. This is the same type of concepts which European values belong to. They differ from tangible things and events that appear in time and space, and are highly meaningful for most people. Heritage interpretation linking history with the sphere of intangible concepts and ideas can reveal the roots and the significance of those European values and ideas. This potential of interpretation for connecting people with value education is not yet fully developed in the heritage sector.
- Based on an exploration of modes of thinking, the InHerit study found a very significant distinction between normal thinking employing the human capacity of intellect and the activity of reflective thinking. Reflective thinking refers to the extraordinary state of mind when a person indulges in the silent dialogue with itself in order to examine the meaning of fundamental concepts or the coherence of an idea. This silent dialogue with one's own self has several qualities, e.g. that it is impossible to consciously cheat oneself and that one cannot consciously contradict oneself. Since Aristotle this mode of thinking is linked to the human conscience.
- Reflective thinking involves a higher level of activity and consciousness than normal thinking which merely applies pre-conceived, and sometimes semiconsciously adapts concepts and ideas to the world outside the individual.
- Developing the ability and habit of reflective thinking is probably the most straightforward way to immunise a democracy against over-simplistic populist movements that neglect European values, and to prepare people to deal with unforeseeable challenges.
- According to the new paradigms that follow from this study, heritage interpretation should reveal multiple perspectives and open up deep questions which provoke people to engage in reflective thinking, rather than providing simple answers which are easy to process.

Heritage interpretation based on these paradigms differs significantly from other visitor information services which merely communicate factual information and/or translate scientific explanations of heritage into a language which is easy to comprehend by non-experts.

These results of the InHerit project form the basis for the following policy recommendations.

¹ More c.f. Lehnés (2016): It's philosophy, Tim, but we love the world. Lehnés & Carter: Digging deeper: Exploring the Philosophical Roots of Heritage Interpretation (PDF at www.interpretingheritage.eu)

1. General recommendations

The following general recommendations target policy makers at all different levels, from European to local.

1.1 Initiatives should be taken to foster heritage interpretation that focuses on the roots of European values and ideas. Such concerted initiatives should be developed and implemented at a scale large enough to make a strong impact on European societies.

Reasoning

The treaty of the European Union claims that “the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities” (article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty). More such values, ideas and goals are formulated in article 3 of the EU treaty, where for instance the goal of sustainable development is mentioned. Furthermore all national constitutions refer to similar values which are deemed as universal in most Western states and by the United Nations.

However, it appears that one of the main threats for Europe and the Union’s member states comes from a wide spread feeling that these values are nothing but hollow “Sunday speech” phrases. At the same time, movements are gaining momentum which openly question or even combat these values which are nevertheless crucial for any plural and democratic society.

In order to really found the Union (as well as the member states) on European values and ideas, it is necessary that the great majority of European citizens acquires and deeply understands what these values and ideas mean. Multiple-perspective heritage interpretation can reveal the deep roots of these values and ideas. It can reveal how our ancestors struggled for or fought against them, how much harm and hardship was caused during history because these values were disregarded. And it can raise understanding for the dilemmas of real life when not all ideals can be achieved at the same time.

Visitors at heritage sites should be given a chance to develop empathy for other humans who lived in other circumstances, and they should be provoked to reflect their personal understanding of these universal ideas. The more citizens take ownership of rich, multi-faceted and differentiated views about European values and ideas, the more the Union and member states will truly be founded on them – and, importantly, the less vulnerable societies will become to black-and-white-thinking which is propagated by populists and different kinds of extremists.

1.2 General education aiming to develop the abilities of human reason and reflective thinking should be strengthened throughout formal and non-formal education.

Reasoning

While Heritage Interpretation can be a very important educational approach to reduce the vulnerability to populism and demagogic campaigns it will need to be complemented by a shift in focus of mainstream education, too. There has been a tendency over the past decades to concentrate more and more on knowledge and skills that are useful for economic growth and employability. For this sake the development of thinking stressed mainly functionalistic intellectual thinking. All this is justified as unemployment is a real challenge for those affected. However, in the light of the new threats, (which remind to tendencies from the 1920s and 1930s) personal development, the human capacity for reason and reflection, the ability to question whether – or better in which respect – something makes sense, need to be strengthened.

This means that subjects such as history, geography, philosophy and ethics should be strengthened already in school education in order to foster citizenship competences in European populations. However these subjects would need to be taught in more progressive ways. It is not enough to impart factual knowledge, but the crucial point is to facilitate critical reflection, deeper understanding and balanced judgements taking different perspectives into account.

Classroom education would facilitate the acquisition and understanding of generic concepts and ideas which are normally illustrated by archetypical examples. On the other hand, heritage interpretation would provide insights in the diversity of concrete real world situations. Interpretation of concrete events and sites offers opportunities to demonstrate that history and reality rarely follow an archetypical plot. Hence, interpretation can reveal the plurality of perceptions and world views different people had in different times in relation to their social positions etc. Consequently, heritage interpretation would be the ideal field of learning to complement class room education through real-world encounters that encourage thinking, but it cannot replace more progressive approaches in classroom education especially with regard to humanities.

Furthermore heritage interpretation reaches people of all age groups, in particular those beyond the family phase who have more time to engage for society. Through life-long learning interpretation can reinforce what has been acquired at school. Such reinforcement, and discovery of new aspects, is important, as knowledge and attitudes acquired at school tend to fade away as time goes by. Also older citizens' beliefs and attitudes towards European values, as well as their affinity or immunity towards populist over-simplifications, matter a lot when they vote or even engage in campaigning for general elections or referendums.

2. Specific recommendations for EU Programmes

2.1 EU educational or cultural programmes should establish a separate well funded programme line to further develop and widely introduce multiple-perspective heritage interpretation on a large scale

Reasoning

Current funding schemes allow for few projects on innovation or transfer of innovation in heritage interpretation and related fields of non-formal education. But in order to empower European citizens (and non-citizen migrants into the EU) to critical reason – complementing scientific-technical intellect – a large scale campaign is required.

It seems to be high time to take serious action in the light of the quickly spreading we-against-them anti-European and anti-pluralist movements. Those movements employ over-simplistic black-and-white thought patterns, half-truths and even outright lies. Sound value education and training in critical reflective thinking based on first-hand experience of historic realities must reach the great majority of people who have the right to vote.

It would not be sufficient to rely on member states for mainstreaming multiple-perspective heritage interpretation. Education for *European* values and critical reflective reasoning is a genuinely European task. It could even happen that some member state administrations rather attempt to reinforce a nationalist variant of black-and-white-thinking putting the “national interest” on top of the value hierarchy while trying to weaken European values that are not in those administrations' interest.

2.2 Research should be fostered on the success factors and impacts of heritage interpretation and progressive education regarding European ideas and values with a transnational focus

Reasoning

More research is needed on the impacts of heritage interpretation for developing human reason and abilities of critical reflection as well as resilience against black-and-white-thinking through progressive education and multiple perspective heritage interpretation. Such research must take into account communication excellence (or shortcomings in communication and facilitation techniques) as well as the thematic contents and perspectives of interpretive provisions.

2.3 Research should be fostered on validation of acquired competences in the field of heritage interpretation

Research is needed in order to assess the appropriateness of existing methodologies for the validation of professional competences in the interpretation sector. The usual quantitative, or pseudo-quantitative, methods for the validation of learning outcomes are probably inadequate for a professional field which is essentially based on creativity and aiming for the development of critical reflective thinking. Nevertheless some proof of competence will be required in order to foster recognition of qualifications in interpretation. Qualitative approaches in validation and documentation of competence development need to be investigated and assessed. Such qualitative methods of competence validation could either complement or even quantitative validation.

2.4 Life programme and other programmes dealing with nature, environment and sustainable developments should support multiple-perspective nature interpretation to facilitate reflective thinking on the values and value conflicts that underlie man's relation with the biosphere and environment

Reasoning

Nature interpretation which provokes reflective thinking on intangible concepts and ideas which link human experience with nature can deepen appreciation and respect for other creatures and nature's wonders. Furthermore, multiple-perspective interpretation which highlights different stakes of different people, living at present as well as future generations, can enhance empathy for those who are affected by environmental change. True reflective thinking, the silent dialogue of the mind with the self, aims for truthfulness and coherence in one's world view – otherwise an individual would consciously contradict him- or herself. This will lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the principle of sustainability and the need to take the perspectives of future generation, people and other creatures living elsewhere on this planet into account.

2.5 Regional development programmes should link support for heritage projects to multiple-perspective interpretation complying with minimum standards in communication excellence.

Reasoning

Various regional development programmes such as LEADER, INTERREG etc. supported many projects in the heritage sector, often with the expectation to enhance tourism and stimulate economic growth. Most of these investments can be considered as lost opportunities from the point of view of facilitating deeper understanding of European values and ideas. Many merely communicated scientific facts about the heritage resources and often they failed even basic

principles of visitor-oriented communication know-how. Many of those projects probably failed even in terms of tourism growth, as they are unlikely to significantly enhance visitors' experience.

Conversely, innovative heritage interpretation that is deliberately designed to reach people's values and beliefs will contribute to the educational goals outlined here. At the same time heritage will be experienced as personally relevant and enriching which will – as a side effect – also result in growth of sustainable heritage tourism.

3. Recommendations for the national and regional policies of member states

3.1 Support the development of formal Bachelor and Master degree programmes for heritage interpretation at university level

Heritage interpretation at its core requires advanced competences in multi-disciplinary thinking and critical reflection. Thus staff leading the development of interpretation services at heritage sites should frequently hold a Master degree in heritage interpretation or related study programmes that cover the interpretive philosophy and communication skills. However there are only very few such programmes established in Europe. The InHerit competence matrix can be a valuable tool to design such Master programmes directed by a clearly defined competences profile. There is also some scope for Bachelor programmes which would enable professionals to develop and lead the interpretation of smaller single theme sites.

It is impossible for any single university programme to cover all areas of competence related to heritage interpretation in full depth. Therefore it is recommended to use the InHerit competence matrix in order to select core competences and optional specialisations at levels and in a combination that makes sense for the needs of the societies and labour markets.

3.2 Mainstreaming initial and advanced in-service training for heritage interpreters

Many people entered the professional field of heritage interpretation with professional degrees from other disciplines. It is rather common for interpretation staff to have started their career with learning by doing. For these people a career path based on the combination of work in practice and structured in-service trainings is needed. Various in-service trainings particularly for guides exist in different countries. But it is hard to compare them, and they are rarely based on an analysis of the societal challenges which professional heritage interpretation should address.

Again for a coherent in-service training system, as a first step, all trainings should be transparent in terms of competences they develop. The InHerit competences matrix provides a reference framework for this task.

Secondly training modules on the role of heritage interpretation for the future of plural and democratic societies and the resulting ethical responsibilities of interpreters need to be integrated already in initial trainings. Furthermore, advanced training courses for lead interpretation and heritage management staff on the philosophical and ethical foundations of heritage interpretation needs to be developed.

3.3 Research

Research should be funded or co-funded by the member states that deals with pressing questions outlined above under 2.2 and 2.3.

About the InHerit project

Nine leading organisations in heritage interpretation and adult education collaborated in InHerit. The main aim was to foster professional development in the heritage sector through further developing competence oriented in-service training.

Heritage interpretation is an educational service to facilitate learning for visitors at museums and sites of natural and cultural heritage. The essential activity is to facilitate learning in terms of meaning-making by embedding heritage in meaningful contexts and ideas which are relevant for the audience. Heritage interpreters use first-hand experience of original objects and illustrative media to compose compelling stories which include selected context knowledge in order to make a relevant point which is likely to provide new insights.

Towards that end, areas of competence were identified for the entire professional field and various competences were mapped on levels of the European Qualifications Framework according to levels of proficiency. The resulting competence matrix is a valuable tool for those developing training courses and higher education programmes focussing on heritage interpretation. This approach has been successfully tested with a new international in-service training and materials. See www.interpretingheritage.eu

This core activity was complemented by two studies on the philosophical foundations of heritage interpretation. One of these studies explored the roots of heritage interpretation in the Enlightenment and Romantics in connection with ideas from progressive education. The second study explored the different modes of thinking which heritage interpretation can facilitate and what they mean for contemporary Europe and its pluralist democratic societies.

Authors

These policy recommendations have been drafted by Patrick Lehnés, past Executive Director of Interpret Europe – European Association for Heritage Interpretation, who was in charge of InHerit's studies on the philosophical foundations of heritage interpretation, and Guy Tilkin, Deputy Director of Landcommanderij Alden Biesen, who coordinated InHerit.

Patrick Lehnés: mail@lehnes.info; Guy Tilkin: guy.tilkin@alden-biesen.be