

## DIFFUSION AND ADOPTION OF THEMATIC INTERPRETATION AT AN INTERPRETIVE HISTORIC SITE<sup>1</sup>

Sam H. Ham & Betty Weiler

*Working Paper 18/04  
April 2004*

DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT  
WORKING PAPER SERIES  
ISSN 1327-5216



### Abstract

Thematic interpretation has become a standard approach in both natural and cultural heritage interpretation programs, and institutions across the world have begun the process of training their staff in the thematic approach. Depending on many factors, successful transition to this new way of thinking can be fast or slow, smooth or difficult. Using the recent experience of Sovereign Hill (a well-known outdoor museum in Victoria, Australia) as a case study, this paper examines the diffusion and adoption of the thematic interpretive approach in order to explore the extent to which the process, from conception to adoption, is occurring at Sovereign Hill. At an organisational level, Sovereign Hill is seen as possessing an advantageous combination of factors that can facilitate and accelerate the adoption process, along with predictable barriers. Rogers' 'diffusion and adoption model' offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding how organisations like Sovereign Hill gradually embrace this new way of approaching interpretation. Implications for training and institutional adaptation are presented.

*Presented at the Interpretation Australia Association National Conference, September 2003. A revised version of this paper has been accepted for publication in a forthcoming special interpretation issue of Annals of Leisure Research Vol 7 (2004)*

**This paper is a work in progress. Material in the paper cannot be used without permission of the author.**

<sup>1</sup> The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and assistance of the Sovereign Hill interpretive staff and director during the training and data collection phases of this research.

# **DIFFUSION AND ADOPTION OF THEMATIC INTERPRETATION AT AN INTERPRETIVE HISTORIC SITE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Originating conceptually in the late 1970s, and more formally developed in the 1980s and 90s, thematic interpretation has arguably become a standard approach to both natural and cultural heritage interpretive programs throughout much of the world (Beck and Cable, 1998; CALM, 2000; Gross and Zimmerman, 2002; Ham, 1983; Ham 1992, Kohen and Sikoryak, 2001; Levy et al., 2001; Lewis, 1980; Pastorelli, 2003; Regnier et al., 1994; Weiler, 1999; Weiler and Ham, 2001). Accordingly, institutions across the world have begun the process of training their staff in the thematic approach to face-to-face interpretation. For an organisation, successful transition to this new practice can be fast or slow, smooth or bumpy, depending on many factors, one of which seems to be the prior experience of trainees. Consistent with research on how cognitive structures and related behaviours change (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo, 1984; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), it is often the less-experienced interpreter who more readily adopts the thematic approach, and the more experienced interpreter who lacks motivation to accept change or who has more difficulty abandoning familiar practices that have seemed to serve well in the past. How to accelerate adoption of the thematic interpretive approach within an organisation of largely experienced interpreters is the focus of this article.

The process through which an innovation like 'thematic interpretation' becomes known, tried and put into practice in a society or organisation is called diffusion and adoption. The diffusion phenomenon, the psychology of adopters, and the characteristics of innovations that make them adoptable have been well documented in many hundreds of studies across a wide variety of fields including agriculture (Beal et al., 1957; Rogers, 1983; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971), forestry (Muth and Hendee, 1980), medicine (Coleman et al., 1957), family planning (Brown and Philliber, 1977); urban water treatment (Crain, 1966), service industries (Barras, 1986), consumer behaviour (Oxley and Nancarrow, 2003; Schiffman et al., 1997) and outdoor recreation, tourism and interpretation (Kocis 1986; Roggenbuck and Watson, 1980; Van Every, 1983).

Widely considered the originator of the diffusion concept, Rogers (1983:11), described an innovation as 'an idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.' Rogers stressed that it is irrelevant whether the idea is 'objectively' new (i.e., how much time has lapsed since its first discovery or use). The key issue is 'perceived' newness. How potential adopters view the innovation, and their subjective assessment of the experiences of other people who have previously adopted it, are centrally influential in whether they themselves will adopt the idea and put it into practice. Understanding how these factors operate, and the variables that influence them, may produce insights into ways the diffusion and adoption of the thematic interpretive approach might be facilitated in organisations intent on delivering thematic interpretation to their audiences.

The primary purposes of this paper are to apply an understanding of the diffusion and adoption process (1) to explain the gradual acceptance of the approach in an organisation employing a large number of relatively experienced interpreters and (2) to suggest mechanisms for facilitating and accelerating the diffusion process in organisations involved in thematic interpretation training and capacity building programs.

## **SOVEREIGN HILL CASE STUDY**

An interpreter's approach is often seen to be a creative decision best left to the practitioner's discretion. Managers and supervisors who realize that their interpreters must be comfortable in how they see and practice their craft are inclined to encourage their individual staff to adjust their

approach to personal style and inclination. Consequently, when thematic interpretation is introduced to an organisation, it is natural that some interpreters will choose to adopt and apply the approach sooner than others (Weiler and Ham, 2002).

Such is the case at Sovereign Hill, a well-known historic park and outdoor museum in Australia depicting the 1850s Victorian Gold Rush and the City of Ballarat's first ten years after the discovery of gold in 1851 (see <http://www.sovereignhill.com.au>). Face-to-face interpretation at Sovereign Hill (SH) consists mainly of in-town 'activations' (short theatrical performances by actors in period dress conducted on Main Street and other locations in the reconstructed town of 1850s Ballarat), scheduled tours of the quartz mine and 'gold fields' (where visitors can pan for gold and interact with staff), various craft demonstrations (gold pouring, lolly making, candle making, etc.), and more extemporaneous, impromptu interpretive contacts in various shops (e.g., the apothecary) and work areas (blacksmith, horse corral, etc.). These activities are developed and delivered by approximately 450 staff (about 200 employees and 250 volunteers). Prior to November 2001, interpretation at SH was approached primarily as 'infotainment,' or as giving historical facts to visitors in an entertaining way. Entertainment and historical accuracy were key driving elements of the approach (Evans, 1991), but as we discuss later, there was little conscious strategy to deliver take-home messages via the on-site interpretive program.

In October 2001, the head of the theatre division (HTD) and two other SH staff attended the Gold 150 Conference convened in nearby Bendigo to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gold Rush. The keynote presentation of that conference focused on the rationale for a thematic approach to interpreting the gold heritage of Victoria and was followed by a two-day training workshop for conference delegates on the theory and practice of thematic interpretation. Following the conference and workshops, the HTD expressed enthusiasm that the thematic approach was needed at SH and suggested that he would take the idea back to his supervisor, the Head of Historical Interpretation (HHI), with a proposal to deliver a training program to develop thematic interpretation capacity among the interpretive staff at SH. This event (see Table 1) commenced diffusion of the thematic interpretive approach at SH. As explained shortly, a number of events have followed in the ensuing 2.5 years. These include strategic meetings with the SH executive board and key management staff to obtain institutional 'buy-in' of the approach, 2 two-day formal training events on thematic interpretation for 33 SH interpreters, two follow-up theme writing sessions conducted by the HTD for 26 staff, a one-day follow-up with the trainers six months later, and the subsequent development by the HHI of a thematic interpretation prospectus for SH, which gave the approach a formal policy underpinning. The trialling of thematic interpretation by individual interpreters at SH continues (Table 1).

-----  
Table 1 about here  
-----

## **WHAT IS THEMATIC INTERPRETATION?**

Though a full discussion of the theory and practice of thematic interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper, more detailed treatments are available in Ham (1992), Ham and Weiler, (2003); Ham and Weiler (2002), and Weiler and Ham (2001). The 'innovation' aspect of the thematic approach to interpretation is its emphasis on 'meaning making' as opposed to previous approaches that exclusively emphasised entertaining fact-giving to tourists. The psychological underpinnings of this approach can be traced to the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), and schema theory (Anderson and Pitchert, 1978; Kardash et al., 1988; Singer and Salovey, 1991), as well as to other research areas in cognitive and social psychology (e.g., Craik and Lockhart, 1972; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Thorndyke, 1977).

Ham's (1992) EROT model of interpretive communication, and later applications of the model by Armstrong and Weiler (2002), Ham and Krumpe (1996), and Ham and Weiler (2003), have held that isolated facts, regardless of momentary entertainment value, will quickly be forgotten by audiences of interpretive programs, leaving little in memory to impact visitors' cognitive structures. Themes, as conceptualised in the EROT model, represent the overarching conclusion a visitor draws from the factual content of an interpretive activity. In colloquial terms, a theme is the moral of the story—the take-home message that is retained in memory once other factual material is forgotten. In psychological terms, themes are beliefs, which are the fundamental building blocks of attitudes and overriding mental constructions (schemas) that directly influence what we attend to, how we view it, and how we react to it.

The premise of thematic interpretation is that interpreters can purposefully develop and plant a theme in the minds of audiences, but to do so requires that they (1) decide ahead of time what their theme is, (2) are able to express the theme in a way that compels the audience to pay attention to it, (3) can weave carefully selected factual material into their presentations that supports and strengthens the theme, and (4) can hold their audiences' attention by presenting the theme and supportive information in an artful and entertaining way. Research (see Ham and Weiler, 2003) suggests that when interpreters follow this approach, they are able to influence in purposeful ways what their audiences think and feel, and sometimes how they behave, with respect to the topic or feature being interpreted. For the purposes of this case study, adoption of the thematic interpretive approach implies that an SH interpreter has chosen to apply these four guidelines in preparing and presenting interpretive activities.

## **CASE STUDY METHODS**

The primary purpose of this case study was to examine diffusion process variables as a means of identifying mechanisms for facilitating and accelerating the diffusion and adoption of thematic interpretation at SH. A qualitative approach was adopted which relied on triangulation involving both secondary and primary data sources.

Secondary data sources included the terms of reference provided for the training, systematic field notes based on participant-observations of interpretation delivered at Sovereign Hill prior to the study, and the results of the training needs analysis, which informed the August 2002 training programs. Meeting notes from discussions with the executive and management staff of SH were particularly revealing with respect to barriers that had the potential to inhibit adoption by some segments of the interpretive staff at SH.

Once the training program commenced, primary and secondary data were collected from a range of sources. For example, evaluations from the August 2002 workshops and unsolicited feedback from a range of staff at SH, mainly via email, were useful. We were also able to use post-training email correspondence with the HTD to identify certain facilitators and inhibitors to the diffusion and adoption process. At the February 2003 follow-up training, trainees were asked to individually and confidentially assess themselves, by writing on a piece of paper in free-response format, the degree to which they were currently applying the thematic approach. This was the only time SH interpreters were questioned directly about their level of adoption of thematic interpretation. As we report here, these data provided useful results that corroborated what we found through the other indirect methods of data collection. Taken together, data from these various sources seem to provide an insightful snapshot of the diffusion of thematic interpretation at SH.

## **THE DIFFUSION AND ADOPTION OF THEMATIC INTERPRETATION AT SOVEREIGN HILL**

The diffusion process is based on communication, both intentional and incidental, between potential adopters and a number of information sources. In workplace settings, where routine contact occurs between adopters and potential adopters, interpersonal information sources can be

especially influential (Fazio and Gilbert, 2000; Rogers, 1995; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971). Thus, in diffusion terms, the 450 or so potential adopters of thematic interpretation at SH constitute a community or social system in which individuals influence one another primarily via interpersonal communication, both intentional and incidental.

The stages leading to adoption are described in various ways depending on the nature of the innovation in question (see, for example, Beal et al., 1957; Rogers and Beal, 1958; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971; Schiffman et al., 1997). Typically, however, potential adopters are seen as passing through five consistently identified stages: (1) *awareness*, (2) *interest*, (3) *evaluation*, (4) *trial*, and (5) *decision* (i.e., adoption or rejection). In other words, when considering a workplace innovation, an individual first has to develop an awareness of its existence. From awareness, the individual may move to developing an interest in knowing more about the innovation, then to actively evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. From evaluation, the potential adopter may progress to trialling the innovation in her/his job and finally to making a decision whether to adopt or reject the innovation as part of his/her regular work routine.

Solo and Rogers (1972) offered a collapsed framework containing the three main categories of *knowledge* (stages 1 and 2), *persuasion* (stage 3), and *decision* (stages 4 and 5). In addition, Solo and Rogers added to their framework the post-decision stage of *confirmation* (an ongoing continuation of the trial stage) in which evidence about the desirability of the innovation continues to accumulate and the earlier adoption-rejection decision is either reinforced or reversed).

At SH, the 450 interpreters are in various stages in this process, but several indicators (see Table 1) suggest that the majority are at least into or through the knowledge stage. Because of (1) the HHI's and HTD's efforts to broadly publicise the 'coming' of thematic interpretation across a broad spectrum of the organisation, (2) presentations made by the trainers to the executive staff and at a general staff meeting in April 2002, and (3) the various events of August through October 2002, most staff are generally aware of 'thematic interpretation' in at least vague ways, and most are aware that upper management has endorsed it as a strategic direction for the SH organisation. According to anecdotal evidence provided by the HTD, this management-level endorsement and the HHI's dissemination of the thematic interpretive prospectus within the organisation have resulted in many SH interpreters becoming interested in thematic interpretation.

Some (the 33 people who were trained in August 2002) are well into the evaluation stage, a phase in which they consciously consider the pros and cons of practicing the thematic approach. As Fazio and Gilbert (2000) pointed out, in classic diffusion studies, interpersonal communication sources become singularly influential in the evaluation stage. More recently, Oxley and Nancarrow (2003) have documented the same phenomenon with respect to adoption of new commercial products. Finally, according to our observations and reports from the HTD, many of the trained group are well into the trial stage as they experiment with the thematic approach and subjectively assess its merits. Again, the pre-eminence of interpersonal information sources is well documented in this stage, and SH interpreters can be expected to be discussing and observing one another's experience with the thematic interpretive approach.

Our data indicate that some of the trained group can be classified as having adopted (at least tentatively) the thematic interpretive approach. Solo and Rogers' fourth category of confirmation has particular relevance for the adoption of thematic interpretation at SH since the innovation itself is something that can be rejected initially and later adopted, or conversely, adopted initially and later rejected. The subjective experience that current adopters have with thematic interpretation and their observations of the experiences of others will, according to research, strongly influence their decision whether to continue practicing it or return to old ways.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ADOPTABLE INNOVATIONS

As individuals move through the previously outlined stages, they continually acquire information about the innovation and begin to weigh the merits of adopting or rejecting it. This process typically involves consideration of the five main criteria described in Table 2. Research has shown that although potential adopters may judge an innovation against a number of criteria, five important questions must be addressed before adoption will occur: (1) does the innovation offer *relative advantage* (2) is the innovation *compatible* with current practice, (3) is it *complex* to understand or apply, (4) can it be *trialled* without unacceptable risk, and (5) are its benefits *observable* and communicable? (Fazio and Gilbert, 2000; Rogers, 1995; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971; Schiffman et al., 1997).

According to the theory, in judging the *relative advantage* of thematic interpretation, SH interpreters will subjectively consider whether the approach seems 'better' than established ways of planning and presenting their programs. If interpreters perceive that thematic interpretation offers advantages or new benefits, they will be more likely to adopt it in their work.

The issue of perceived *compatibility* focuses essentially on whether SH interpreters feel that adopting the thematic approach is consistent with what they perceive to be the requirements of their job. To the extent that practicing thematic interpretation does not require them to 'unlearn' or discard most of what they already know and do, they will see it as consistent and compatible. Additionally, the more they see the thematic approach as being consistent with their personal values and how they currently approach their work, they will be more likely to adopt it.

Perceived *complexity* focuses on how difficult SH interpreters feel practicing thematic interpretation will be. The simpler and more straightforward they perceive it to be, the easier it will be for them to adopt it.

*Trialability* refers to SH interpreters' subjective determination that they can attempt the thematic approach on a small scale, or in incremental steps, without taking undue risk. 'Risk' to a face-to-face interpreter can be seen as falling into at least three categories, each of which is normative. One is the risk of failing in the eyes of peers and workmates. A second is the risk of embarrassing oneself in front of the public. Because interpreters at SH may work in vastly different functional areas within its decentralised corporate framework, a third category of perceived risk includes worries about whether immediate supervisors support or condone the new approach. Minimising perceived risk in all three categories enhances the trialability of thematic interpretation in the eyes of the 450 SH interpreters.

Finally, *observability* refers to the extent that the benefits and advantages of following the thematic approach are readily visible both to the individual and to others in the SH interpretive social system. The observability of thematic interpretation at SH is enhanced when potential adopters have opportunities to see positive results in their own trials and in the experiences of other interpreters who are either trying or have already adopted the thematic approach. Due to the central role of communication in this process, Schiffman et al. (1997) prefer the term 'communicability' to 'observability' when discussing the relevance of this criterion to consumer behaviour.

-----  
Table 2 about here  
-----

## RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF THE CRITERIA IN THE DECISION PROCESS

According to Rogers and Shoemaker (1971), the relative importance of each of these criteria varies according to the stage of the adoption process, itself (as reflected in the sample comments from SH interpreters included in Table 3):

- At the knowledge stage (awareness and interest), assessment of the innovation's *compatibility* and *complexity* will predominate.
- During the persuasion stage (evaluation), the innovation's *relative advantage* and *observability* (communicability) will be most important.
- At the decision stage (trial and decision to adopt or reject), the *trialability* of the innovation will be most influential.

At SH, therefore, interpreters at different stages of adoption will likely focus on different aspects of the thematic interpretive approach (Table 3). Those at the knowledge stage are just learning about and becoming interested in the approach. Especially important for these interpreters will be reassurance that (1) they can apply it within their current job responsibilities, (2) it is consistent with what their supervisors expect of them as employees, and (3) they are capable of understanding and doing it.

Interpreters at the evaluation stage of adoption are especially interested in whether practicing thematic interpretation will produce any improvements to the status quo. Exactly what constitutes an 'improvement' will vary from person to person and may include seeing (or imagining) making one's job easier, better job performance, having more fun on the job, having a more positive impact on visitors, or even simply breaking the monotony or boredom with one's current job. In order to judge these things, of course, interpreters need to be able to 'see' the difference. This will occur only when they can readily observe the work of their peers and when opportunities are present to discuss and compare experiences either on or off the job.

During the decision stage, interpreters must be able to experiment with the thematic approach in a way that they perceive as non-threatening. Enhancing the trailability of thematic interpretation will therefore require establishment of a low-risk (or risk-free) psychological environment, one conducive to trying new things. Encouragement, positive feedback, incentive and reward will likely play major roles in this process. Comments from several of the 33 interpreters trained in August 2002 revealed an underlying reticence to apply the thematic approach in their work because they felt a lack of support from immediate supervisors. In light of this finding, efforts to build better understanding and appreciation of the approach among supervisors seem especially important.

-----  
 Table 3 about here  
 -----

## **ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE**

Previous research suggests that at the persuasion and decision stages, potential adopters will be influenced primarily by the personal experience and interpersonal communication of other interpreters (Fazio and Gilbert, 2000; Lionberger, 1960; Oxley and Nancarrow, 2003; Schiffman et al., 1997). This suggests that SH interpreters will largely base their decision to adopt or reject the thematic approach based on what they and their workmates experience (and say about their experience) in applying thematic interpretation. Those who work together in the same functional area at SH (i.e., actors, tour guides, demonstrators, shopkeepers, wheelwrights, etc.) will logically look to one another first because of the similarity of their work and the common opportunities and constraints on conducting interpretive programs it engenders. Based on substantial prior research (e.g., Oxley and Nancarrow, 2003; Rogers, 1995; Schiffman, 1997), we can predict that the opinion leaders and role models within each SH functional area will strongly influence the adoption-rejection decision of their peers in the same work area. Such a conclusion underscores the central importance of interpersonal communication among interpreters in the diffusion of thematic

interpretation at SH. When different types of adopters are considered, the strategic role of interpersonal communication is further highlighted.

## TYPES OF ADOPTERS

Diffusion of an innovation through a social system requires time. As earlier discussed, when thematic interpretation is introduced to an organisation like SH, it is natural that some interpreters will choose to adopt and apply the approach sooner than others. Statistically, the speed at which different groups accept an innovation reflects the type of adopters they are. Adopters at SH are those who choose to plan and present interpretive activities as part of their regular and normal work practice following the four defining elements of the thematic approach previously outlined.

At a societal level, adopters have been empirically classified by Rogers (1995) and others (e.g., Muth and Hendee, 1980) according to the criteria described in Table 4. Over nearly five decades (see, for example, Beal et al., 1957; Rogers, 1995 and Oxley and Nancarrow, 2003), social scientists have found that the five different types of adopters of a given innovation tend to be normally distributed within a social system, with roughly 16 percent (the combined group of innovators and early adopters) to be the first to adopt a given innovation, followed by 34 percent (the early majority) as the second wave of adopters, another 34 percent (the late majority), and the remaining 16 percent (the laggards) which may never adopt the innovation. Table 4 describes the prototypical characteristics of each of type of adopter and how they might be represented among the interpretive staff at SH.

-----  
Table 4 about here  
-----

According to the diffusion and adoption model, SH interpreters ought to fall into all five categories in a more or less normal distribution. Assuming, therefore, that there are 450 potential adopters of thematic interpretation at SH, we could theoretically expect approximately 11 of them to be innovators, 61 early adopters, 153 in the early majority, 153 in the late majority, and 72 laggards (Figure 1). Of the five groups, the first two (innovators and early adopters) emerge as the most strategically important since it is largely their example that sets the stage for the rest of the diffusion process. Although the typical innovator differs from the typical early adopter in a few important ways, Oxley and Nancarrow (2003: 40) correctly observe that ‘...whether one is an innovator or early adopter may differ across product categories.’ For this reason, it may be difficult to distinguish innovators from early adopters other than on the basis of their apparent credibility as role models and opinion leaders for the early majority and subsequent adopter categories.

-----  
Figure 1 about here  
-----

A practical implication of this role fuzziness is that thematic interpretation opinion leaders in a social system like SH could conceivably emerge out of both categories. And since SH interpretive staff work in such varied jobs, it is reasonable to assume that opinion leadership and credibility are determined within job classifications (among people who do similar work and therefore share a common reality). Therefore, SH managers in search of interpretation role models might look separately to the actors, tour guides, shopkeepers and various kinds of demonstrators (gold pouring, wheel wrighting, steam operations, candle making, etc.) for opinion leaders in those specific work areas. Recognising this potential, the HHI requested the trainers to work separately with the wheelwrights and steam operations staff on thematic interpretive products related to their work regimes (see February 2004 in Table 1).

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Three categories of implications emerge from the foregoing analysis: implications for training, implications for managing interpersonal communication among SH interpreters, and implications for managing the organisation.

With respect to training, there is a need to deliver basic thematic interpretive training to those who may be aware of the concept, but uninitiated as to how to do it. Such training could be delivered in-house or in partnership with outside trainers, but needs to be consistent with the principles already taught to the previously trained groups. All SH staff need to feel that at least part of their job is to be an interpreter (a fact that escapes many staff at SH who see themselves in other lines of work), and therefore that learning how to deliver thematic interpretation is an important aspect of their professional development. They also need to be convinced that they have the capacity to do it, an outcome that will require regular and consistent follow-up by skilled trainers and mentors.

In terms of managing interpersonal communication, management needs to create opportunities to discuss and reinforce the benefits of thematic interpretation, to combat the perception by some that 'it is being shoved down our throats like a religion.' One strategic mechanism for accelerating the diffusion of thematic interpretation at SH might be to identify the most credible innovators and early adopters within each specific job area (theatre, tours, demonstrations, and shops) according to their interpretive skill in the context of their specific jobs. Once identified, trainers would work one-on-one with these individuals toward the development of a model thematic interpretation activity appropriate for their type of work (as is being done in February 2004 with the wheelwrights and steam operations staff). As the models are gradually unveiled, their workmates will readily see the results (observability) and be more capable of judging for themselves the relative advantage, compatibility, complexity and ultimately the trialability of the thematic approach within their own work area. Another strategy is to undertake research that demonstrates the relative advantages of the approach, such as improved visitor satisfaction, internalisation of key themes by visitors, and so on. A third approach might be to facilitate visits to other heritage sites and attractions that are successfully implementing the thematic interpretive approach, or to stage an event where staff from these organisations spend some time with SH staff (either at SH or elsewhere) in order to exchange and compare experiences with thematic interpretation.

Finally, the SH workplace needs to incorporate recognition of excellence in thematic interpretation. This may require some work with particular supervisors so that they understand the benefits of, and are able and willing to recognise and reward thematic interpretive practice. Indeed, there may be a need to reward good supervision of thematic interpretation, as at present some supervisors appear unconvinced of the strategic importance of interpretation at SH. As an organisation, SH could also develop employee reward schemes for interpretive excellence, perhaps linked to external opportunities that will ultimately benefit the organisation such as attendance at an interpretation conference or nomination for a national interpretation award.

In conclusion, SH is typical of a large organisation with experienced, competent and confident staff and management. Research on the diffusion process suggests that adopting new ways of doing things can be slow, and at times, difficult in such organisations. As a tourist attraction, SH is not broken. However, it is also an historic park and outdoor museum with a mandate for heritage conservation, which it can achieve in part by communicating the importance of Victoria's gold heritage in compelling ways that make visitors connect with this heritage. It is this latter role that makes the adoption and diffusion of thematic interpretation so important. This study continues to monitor this process in order to assist SH and other similar interpretive sites in facilitating the process.

## REFERENCES

- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50,179-211.
- Anderson, R. and Pitchert, J. (1978). Recall of previously unrecallable information following a shift in perspective. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 17(1), 1-12.
- Armstrong, E. and Weiler, B. (2002). Improving the tourist experience: Evaluation of interpretation components of guided tours in national parks. Gold Coast, Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism Research.
- Barras, R. (1986). Towards a theory of innovation in services. *Research Policy* 15(4), 161-73.
- Beal, G., Rogers, E. and Bohlen, J. (1957). Validity of the concept of stages in the adoption process. *Rural Sociology* 22, 166-68.
- Beck, L. and Cable, T. (1998). *Interpretation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Champaign, Sagamore Publishing.
- Brown, L. and Philliber, S. (1977). The diffusion of a population-related innovation: the planned parenthood affiliate. *Social Science Quarterly* 58(2), 215-28.
- CALM. (2000). *Developing ecotours and other interpretive activity programs*. Perth, Department of Conservation and Land Management.
- Coleman, J., Katz, E. and Menzel, H. (1957). The diffusion of an innovation among physicians. *Sociometry* 20(4), 253-70.
- Craik, F. and Lockhart, R. (1972). A framework for memory research. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 11, 671-84.
- Crain, R. (1966). Fluoridation: the diffusion of an innovation among cities. *Social Forces* 44(4), 467-476.
- Evans, M. (1991). Historical interpretation at Sovereign Hill. In *Packaging the past* (edited by J. Rickard and P. Spearritt). Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 142-52.
- Fazio, J. and Gilbert, D. (2000). *Public relations and communications for natural resource managers*. Dubuque, Kendall/Hunt.
- Fishbein, M. and Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention and behavior: an introduction to theory and research*. Reading, Addison-Wesley.
- Gross, M. and Zimmerman, R. (2002). *Interpretive centers: the history, design and development of nature and visitor centers*. Stevens Point, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point.
- Ham, S. (1992). *Environmental interpretation: a practical guide for people with big ideas and small budgets*. Golden, Fulcrum.
- Ham S. (1983). Cognitive psychology and interpretation: synthesis and application. *Journal of Interpretation* 8(1), 11-27.
- Ham, S. and Krumpel, E. (1996). Identifying audiences and messages for nonformal environmental education: a theoretical framework for interpreters. *Journal of Interpretation Research* 1(1), 11-23.
- Ham, S. and Weiler, B. (2003). Toward a theory of quality in cruise-based nature guiding. *Journal of Interpretation Research* 7(2), 29-49.
- Ham, S. and Weiler, B. (2002). Interpretation as the centrepiece of sustainable wildlife tourism. In *Sustainable tourism: a global perspective* (edited by R. Harris, T. Griffin and P. Williams). Oxford, Butterworth-Heinemann, 35-44.
- Kardash, C., Royer, J. and Greene, B. (1988). Effects of schemata on both encoding and retrieval of information from prose. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 80(3), 324-29.

- Kocis, S. (1986). The adoption and diffusion of methods for estimating recreation use in the Pacific Northwest region of the US Forest Service. Moscow, unpublished masters thesis, Department of Resource Recreation and Tourism, University of Idaho, USA.
- Kohen, R. and Sikoryak, K. (2001). *Theme guide: a guide to the thematic approach to interpretation used by the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service*. Denver, US National Park Service.
- Levy, B., Lloyd, S., and Schreiber, S. (2001). *Great tours! thematic tours and guide training for historic sites*. New York, Alta Mira Press.
- Lewis, W. (1980). *Interpreting for park visitors*. Philadelphia, Eastern National Park and Monument Association, Eastern Acorn Press.
- Lionberger, H. (1960). *Adoption of new ideas and practices*. Ames, Iowa State University Press.
- Muth, R. and Hendee, J. (1980). Technology transfer and human behaviour. *Journal of Forestry* 78(3), 141-44.
- Oxley, M. and Nancarrow, C. (2003). Measuring diffusion: fast tracking new products. *Admap* 38(2), 40-43.
- Pastorelli, J. (2003). *Enriching the experience: an interpretive approach to tour guiding*. Frenchs Forest, Hospitality Press.
- Petty, R. and Cacioppo, J. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. New York, Springer-Verlag.
- Petty, R. and Cacioppo, J. (1984). The effects of involvement on responses to argument quantity and quality: central and peripheral routes to persuasion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46, 69-81.
- Regnier, K., Gross, M. and Zimmerman, R. (1994). *The interpreter's guidebook: techniques for programs and presentations*. Stevens Point, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point.
- Rogers, E. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations (4<sup>th</sup> edition)*. New York, The Free Press.
- Rogers, E. (1983). *Diffusion of innovations (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)*. New York, The Free Press.
- Rogers, E. and Beal, G. (1958). *Reference group influence in the adoption of agricultural technology*. Ames, Department of Economics and Sociology Bulletin, Iowa State University.
- Rogers, E. and Shoemaker, F. (1971). *Communications of innovations: a cross-cultural approach*. New York, The Free Press.
- Roggenbuck, J. and Watson, A. (1980). Technology transfer: lateral diffusion of innovations in forest recreation planning and management. Washington, DC, Pinchot Institute for Conservation Studies.
- Schiffman, L., Bednall, D., Cowley, E., O'Cass, A., Watson, J. and Kanuk, L. (1997). *Consumer behaviour (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Frenchs Forest, Prentice Hall.
- Singer, J. and Salovey, P. (1991). Organized knowledge structures and personality: person schemas, self-schemas, prototypes, and scripts. In *Person schemas and maladaptive interpersonal patterns* (edited by M. Horowitz). Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 33-79.
- Solo, R. and Rogers, E. (1972). *Inducing technological change for economic growth and development*. East Lansing, Michigan State University Press.
- Sovereign Hill (2003). Web site: <http://www.sovereignhill.com.au/>
- Thorndyke, P. (1977). Cognitive structures in comprehension and memory of narrative discourse. *Cognitive Psychology* 9(1), 77-110.

- Van Every, M. (1983). Mapping interpretive services: development, application and improvement of a technique. Moscow, unpublished masters thesis, Department of Resource Recreation and Tourism, University of Idaho, USA.
- Weiler, B. (1999). Assessing the interpretation competencies of ecotour guides. *Journal of Interpretation Research* 4(1), 80-83.
- Weiler, B. and Ham, S. (2002). Tour guide training: a model for sustainable capacity building in developing countries. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 10(1), 52-69.
- Weiler, B. and Ham, S. (2001). Tour guides and interpretation. In *The Encyclopedia of Ecotourism* (edited by D. Weaver). Wallingford, CAB International, 549-64.

**Table 1: Chronology of events in the diffusion of thematic interpretation at Sovereign Hill.**

| Date                                 | Event  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Oct 2001                             | HTD <sup>1</sup> and two other SH staff attend the Gold 150 conference and participate in a two-day workshop on thematic interpretation in Bendigo   |
| Nov 2001-<br>Jan 2002                | HTD persuades HHI <sup>2</sup> to consider the approach. HHI subsequently consults literature on thematic interpretation, does background research on trainers, and discusses the concept with respected opinion sources. HHI contacts the trainers directly to discuss his needs and to further explore training content and application at SH          |
| April 2002                           | Trainers conduct site visit to observe interpreters, conduct diagnostic and training needs analysis and meet key staff. Written report guides the development of the August talks to executive and middle managers and of the August training programs. HHI and HTD begin staff-wide awareness raising of the “coming” of thematic interpretation at SH. |
| August 2002                          | Trainers make presentations to the executive board and middle managers (20) and general staff meeting (about 60) about thematic interpretation   |
| August 2002                          | Two 2–day workshops on thematic interpretation conducted at SH (33 staff). HHI unveils new Interpretive Prospectus (policy statement for thematic interpretation). Trainers make   |
| September-<br>October<br>2002        | Mass training of staff was attempted by HTD who reported achieving little success. The HTD attributed the shortcomings of mass training to the relative difficulty interpreters in some work areas were having in applying thematic interpretation in their specific jobs. A more tailored approach to mentoring ensued.                                 |
| November<br>2002-<br>January<br>2003 | More focused mentoring of individual staff by HTD in development of thematic interpretive products, particularly in ‘structured’ activities such as mine tours, wheelwright demonstrations and candy making.   |
| February<br>2003                     | Trainers conduct a one-day follow-up workshop and reinforcement with the 33 previously trained staff. Free-response data collected from trainees on their progress toward applying the thematic approach in their interpretive activities  |
| May 2003                             | Meeting with HHI, HTD and other staff to discuss diffusion of the interpretive approach at SH and to plot future strategy  |
| February<br>2004                     | Trainers work one-on-one with wheelwrights and steam operations staff in developing thematic interpretive products.  |

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Head of Theatre Division at Sovereign Hill

<sup>2</sup> Head of Historical Interpretation at Sovereign Hill

**Table 2: Innovation attributes that influence the diffusion and adoption of thematic interpretation at SH.<sup>1</sup>**

| <b>Attribute</b>                   | <b>Relevance to the Diffusion of Thematic Interpretation at SH</b>   |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Relative Advantage                 | The degree to which SH interpreters perceive the thematic approach as better or advantageous compared to the status quo or previous approaches   |
| Compatibility                      | The degree to which SH interpreters perceive the thematic approach fits in with their current needs and ways of doing things. Roughly, the extent to which thematic interpretation requires a departure from current practice and how well it matches the interpreters' values |
| Complexity                         | The degree to which SH interpreters perceive the thematic approach to be difficult to understand or apply  |
| Trialability                       | The degree to which SH interpreters feel that they can 'try out' the thematic approach without taking unacceptable risk  |
| Observability<br>(Communicability) | The degree to which the effects and benefits of thematic interpretation can be seen, imagined or described by adopters and potential adopters  |

<sup>1</sup> Sources: Rogers (1983); Fazio and Gilbert (2000); Schiffman et al. (1997) and Van Every (1983).

**Table 3: Relative importance of innovation attributes at different stages of the adoption process.<sup>1</sup>**

| Stage of Adoption                | Criteria Most Affecting Rate of Adoption  | Examples of Relevant Comments from SH Interpreters (n=33)   | Implications for Accelerating the Diffusion of Thematic Interpretation at SH   |
|----------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Knowledge (Awareness & Interest) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Compatibility</li> <br/> <li>▪ Complexity</li> </ul>         | <p>‘It’s less relevant for shop staff than those doing demonstrations. There’s not enough time in busy shops to do it.’</p> <p>‘It’s not always practical.’</p> <p>‘It’s hard to break away from old ways.’</p> <p>‘I find it hard to bring it in to a 10 minute demonstration.’</p> <p>‘There’s not enough time.’</p> <p>‘I’m not sure how to apply it.’</p> <p>‘I don’t really understand.’</p> | <p>Apprehensions of staff are likely to focus on (1) whether they can accommodate the approach within the constraints of their job responsibilities and (2) whether they can understand and apply the interpretive approach correctly. Continued training, with the aim of simplifying the approach and demonstrating how can it be applied by staff with different job requirements, is essential. Efforts to educate supervisors in each work division about the compatibility of thematic interpretation with their role in the SH organisation seems especially important.</p> |
| Persuasion (Evaluation)          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relative advantage</li> <br/> <li>▪ Observability</li> </ul> | <p>‘It can give you a focus.’</p> <p>‘It’s been great for me in structuring my tours.’</p> <p>‘I’m enjoying people trying and seeing its potential.’</p> <p>‘It has produced an air of motivation not only in my role as a guide but across the park.’</p> <p>‘It has enormous potential to make Sovereign Hill remarkable.’</p>  | <p>Staff within each work division need to be able to see or learn about advantages of following the interpretive approach. Opportunities for them to observe earlier adopters practicing thematic interpretation, and opportunities for them to discuss and exchange experiences, will have a significant effect on the rate of adoption within a given work area.</p>  |
| Decision (Trial & Adoption)      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Trialability</li> </ul>                                      | <p>‘What if I start something ...and get blocked?’</p> <p>‘I’m scared that the themes I come up with aren’t sophisticated or clever enough.’</p> <p>‘I feel there has been not enough encouragement or time allocated.’</p> <p>‘After August I walked away happy and ready to try, but there seems to be a lot of road blocks.’</p> <p>‘I don’t really get a lot of opportunity to apply it.’</p> | <p>Individual interpreters must be able to try thematic interpretation in the workplace without fear of failing or incrimination by peers or supervisors. Encouragement from supervisors and management, along with providing tangible and intangible incentives for developing thematic interpretive programs, will probably be effective in increasing the rate of adoption.</p>   |

<sup>1</sup> Sources: Rogers (1983); Rogers and Shoemaker (1971); Solo and Rogers (1972).

**Table 4: Types of adopters.<sup>1</sup>**

| <b>Type of Adopter<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>Typical Characteristics<sup>3</sup></b>  | <b>Relevance to the Diffusion of Thematic Interpretation at SH</b>  |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Innovators                         | Venturesome, risky, well read and informed, connected with other innovators, sometimes eccentric,   | A few SH interpreters are eager to try the thematic approach mainly because it is new and represents an improvement over the status quo. They are easily convinced of its relative advantage and feel ready to adopt it without a lot of unnecessary trial-and-error testing. These interpreters understood & internalized the content of the August 2002 training and are already applying it in their work.   |
| Early adopters                     | Respected, models, opinion leaders, well integrated into local social system, highly credible   | These interpreters are well integrated into the SH social system. Many have credibility with their workmates and therefore represent important role models if they are able to produce excellent examples of thematic interpretation appropriate to their specific job responsibilities at SH. Adopters in other categories carefully watch the experience of these interpreters and may seek their advice and information.   |
| Early majority                     | Deliberate, accept innovations slightly sooner than the average adopter, draw on experience of earlier adopters before adopting                     | These interpreters are watching the experience of the early adopters and possibly some of the innovators. They will deliberate for some time before deciding to adopt the thematic approach in their programs. They represent the first large (and therefore widely visible) group of adopters whose sheer numbers and credibility can sway the late majority to adopt the thematic approach in their interpretive activities.  |
| Late majority                      | Sceptical, view new ideas with caution, adopt slightly later than average adopter & often under social / economic pressure; go along with the crowd | These interpreters are comfortable with the status quo and generally not attracted to new ways of doing things. They are still not convinced that what they are doing needs to be changed or improved and therefore lack motivation to accept the thematic approach. Some of these interpreters may never adopt thematic interpretation unless their reluctance puts their jobs in jeopardy or peer pressure mounts to the point that they feel marginalised. Opinion leaders in previous groups, and especially in the more similar early majority, are centrally influential. |
| Laggards                           | Traditional, focus on the past, last to adopt & sometimes after the innovation is already obsolete, often do not ever adopt new ideas               | Some 'hold-outs' will eventually begin applying the thematic approach in their activities, even if begrudgingly. Their workplace peers are the single most influential social group. A minority of SH interpreters may never adopt the thematic approach regardless of how much time passes or how many of their workmates adopt it. These few are suspicious of new ideas and view thematic interpretation as an unnecessary rocking-of-the-boat at SH. Some of them may view adopters with contempt.  |

<sup>1</sup> Sources: Fazio and Gilbert (2000); Muth and Hendee (1980); Oxley and Nancarrow (2003); Rogers (1983, 1995); and Schiffman et al. (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Characteristics are not necessarily accurate for a particular person, but they apply statistically to each type of adopter.

**Figure 1: Adoption sequence with theoretical number and proportion of SH interpreters in each adopter category (n=450).**

