

# Qualities of heritage interpretation



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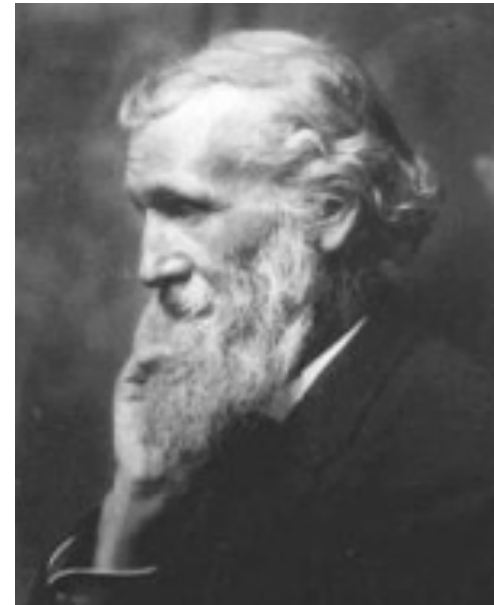
Glacier Point Trailside Museum,  
Herbert Maier, 1925





# John Muir

I'll interpret the rocks,  
learn the language of flood,  
storm and the avalanche.  
I'll acquaint myself with the  
glaciers and wild gardens,  
and get as near to the heart  
of the world as I can.



*Muir 1871 in Wolfe, L. (1978) The Life of John Muir.  
Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 144*



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# What do visitors do at heritage places?

“We look, we hear, we smell, we touch (if we are allowed), we walk, we ramble, we climb, we rest, we interact with our companions, we imagine, we feel, we recall memories, we may laugh, we may cry, we may feel anger, anxiety, maybe disorientation, we may feel loss, we may feel pain, we may feel numb. We photograph (a lot), we read signs, we listen to audio-tours, we trail after a guide, we consult guidebooks, we may attend a lecture or multi-media presentation, we pore over maps, we closely observe models and diagrams, we watch a performance, we refer to Google on our iPhones, we download an e-tour, we chat with our companions or on our phones, we think about something quite removed from where we are, we reflect, we may argue, we may feel confronted, we may feel small, we may feel proud, we may feel like a cosmopolitan or we may feel patriotic.”

Staiff, R. (2016) Reimagining heritage interpretation. Enchanting the past-future,



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# The interpretive triangle



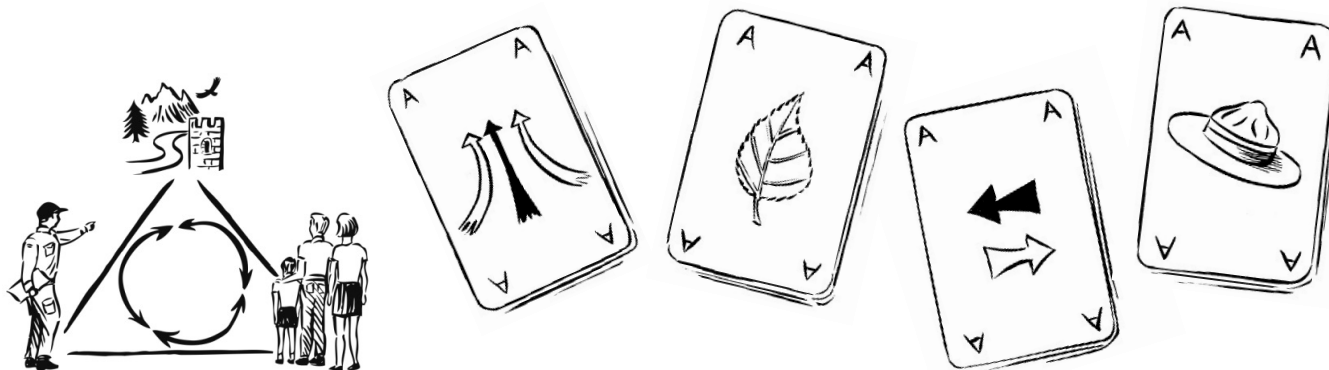
How can we help people  
to connect to their heritage?



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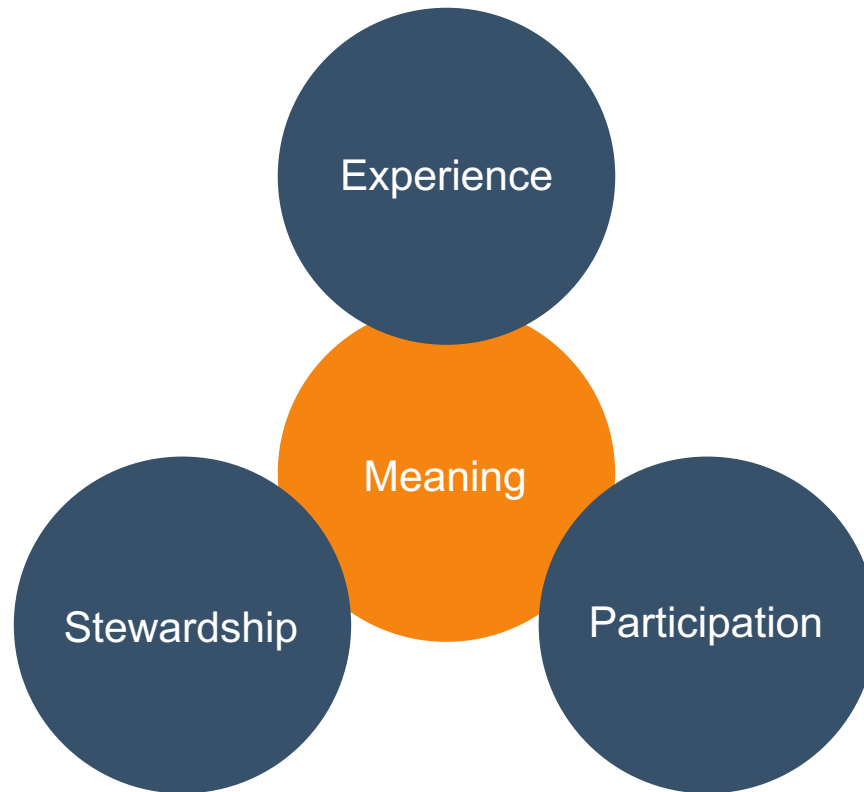
# The interpretive triangle

- Offering paths to deeper **meaning**
- Turning objects/sites into **experiences**
- Provoking resonance and **participation**
- Fostering **stewardship** for all heritage



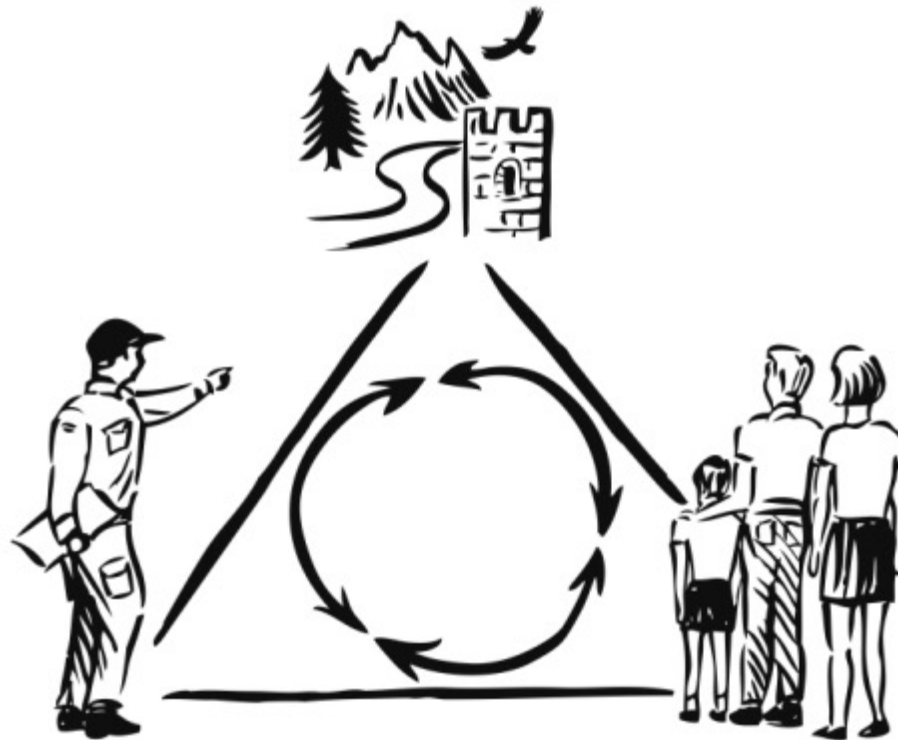
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# The interpretive triangle



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# The interpretive triangle



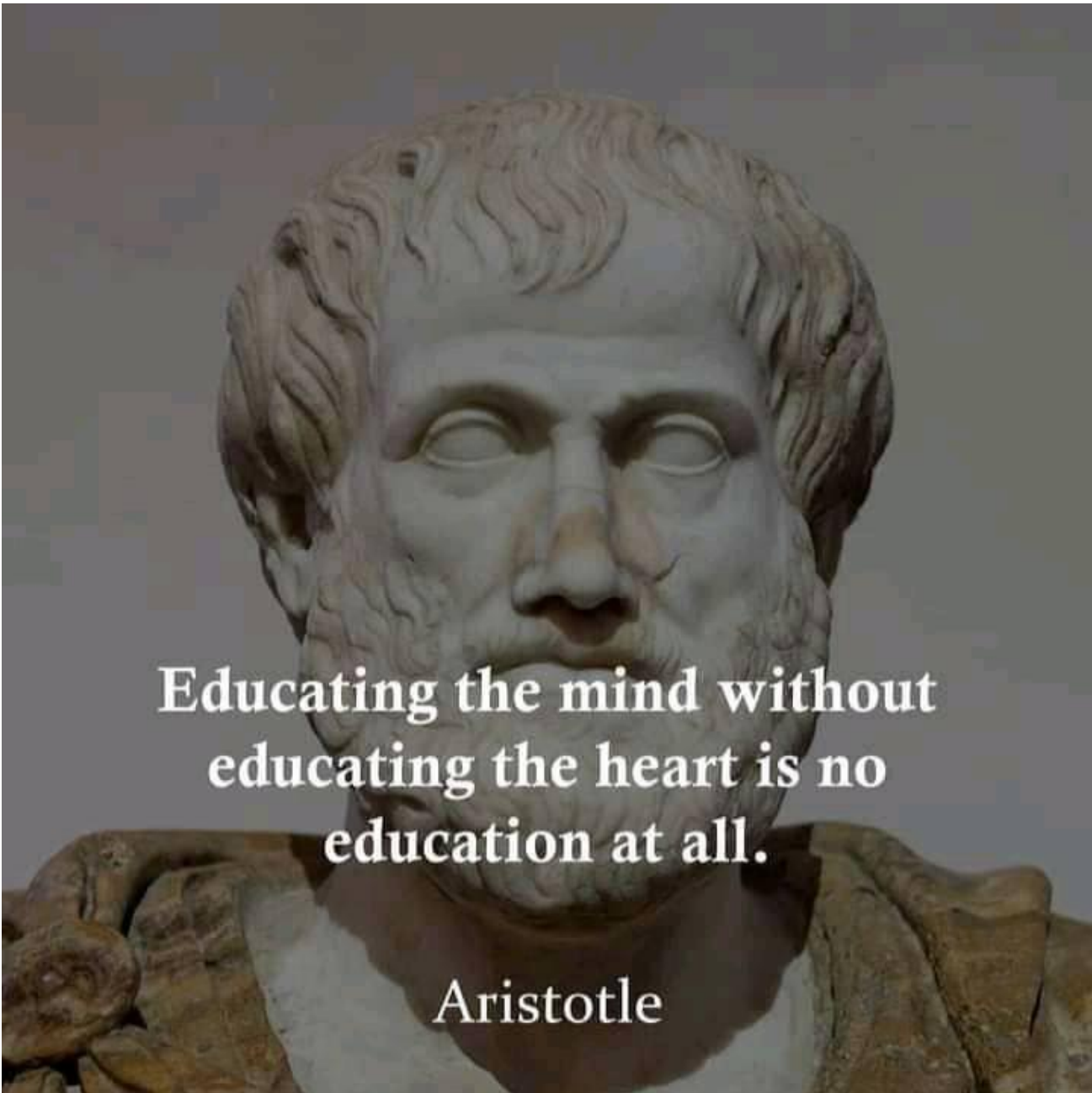
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# The killer question: So what?



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A close-up photograph of a marble bust of the philosopher Aristotle. He has a full, curly beard and hair, and is looking slightly to the right. The bust is set against a dark, neutral background.

**Educating the mind without  
educating the heart is no  
education at all.**

**Aristotle**



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# Don't teach or instruct, but provoke and inspire



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# The visitor experience - “Declaration of visitor rights”

<b>1 Comfort</b>	“Meet my basic needs”
<b>2 Orientation</b>	“Make it easy for me to find my way around”
<b>3 Welcome/Belonging</b>	“Make me feel welcome”
<b>4 Enjoyment</b>	“I want to have fun”
<b>5 Socializing</b>	“I came to spend time with family and friends”
<b>6 Respect</b>	“Accept me for who I am and what I know”
<b>7 Communication</b>	“Help me understand, and let me talk, too”
<b>8 Learning</b>	“I want to learn something new”
<b>9 Choice and Control</b>	“Let me choose; give me some control”
<b>10 Challenge &amp; Confidence</b>	“Give me a challenge I know I can handle”
<b>11 Revitalization</b>	“Help me leave refreshed and restored”

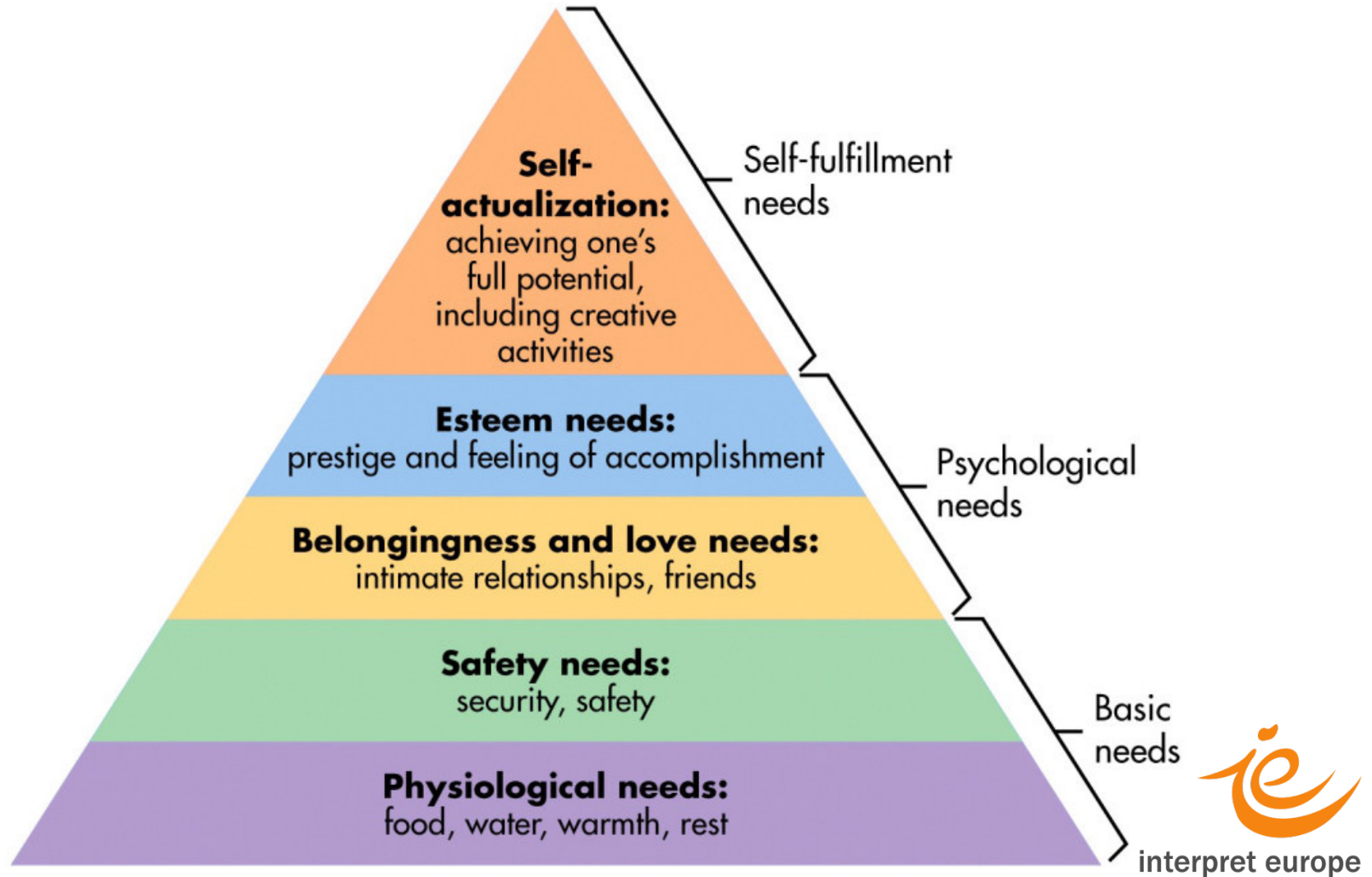
- Rand, J. (1996), 'The 227-Mile Museum, or Why We Need a Visitors' Bill of Rights', Visitor Studies Association.



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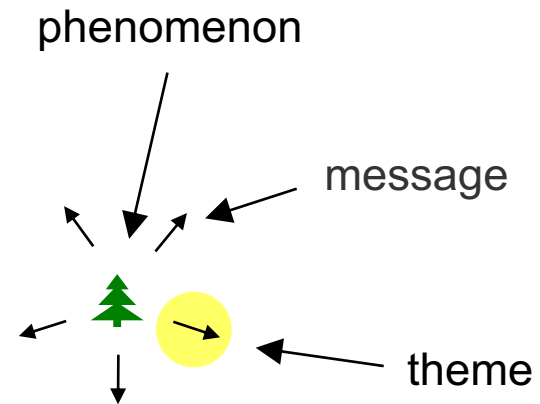
# Maslow hierarchy of needs



# Developing a theme to frame your message

A single phenomenon can communicate several messages.

Let's take the strongest message in relation to our participants and create an attractive theme



The theme forms the basis of your interpretive talk



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# Introducing themes to communicate your message and make it meaningful

01

A theme expresses the reason why you should care about an object or place

02

It frames and amplifies what you want to say

03

It connects with the head, hands and heart



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Careful! A theme is not...

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A subject: Geology

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A topic: Norwegian fjords



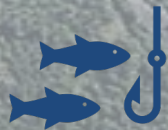
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# A theme is...



A sentence: subject, object and verb



Sculpted by the sheer power of ancient ice, this fjord now provides a fertile but fragile foundation for local life



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Or



Topic: Expanding horizons



Theme: Before engines, roads and the internet, the lives of people in this rural community were much more locally-focused”



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# Helping your visitors access your heritage



## Stepping stones



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# Stepping stones

## connecting visitors to heritage objects

game  
example  
metaphor and simile  
personal experience  
illustration  
comparison  
quotation  
chronological and local relationship  
humanisation  
changing perspective  
unexpected discovery  
poem/song



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# Stepping stones

## Between the guide and visitors

face-to-face  
contact

active listening

smile

body language

humour

experiences in  
common



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# Different perspectives



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# Asking open questions

Starting a discussion, creating a relationship with the visitors

## **Focus question:**

What do you feel when you touch this Plane tree?

## **Transfer question:**

What do you remember about these trees from your childhood?

## **Process question:**

How would this tree react if its bark was damaged?

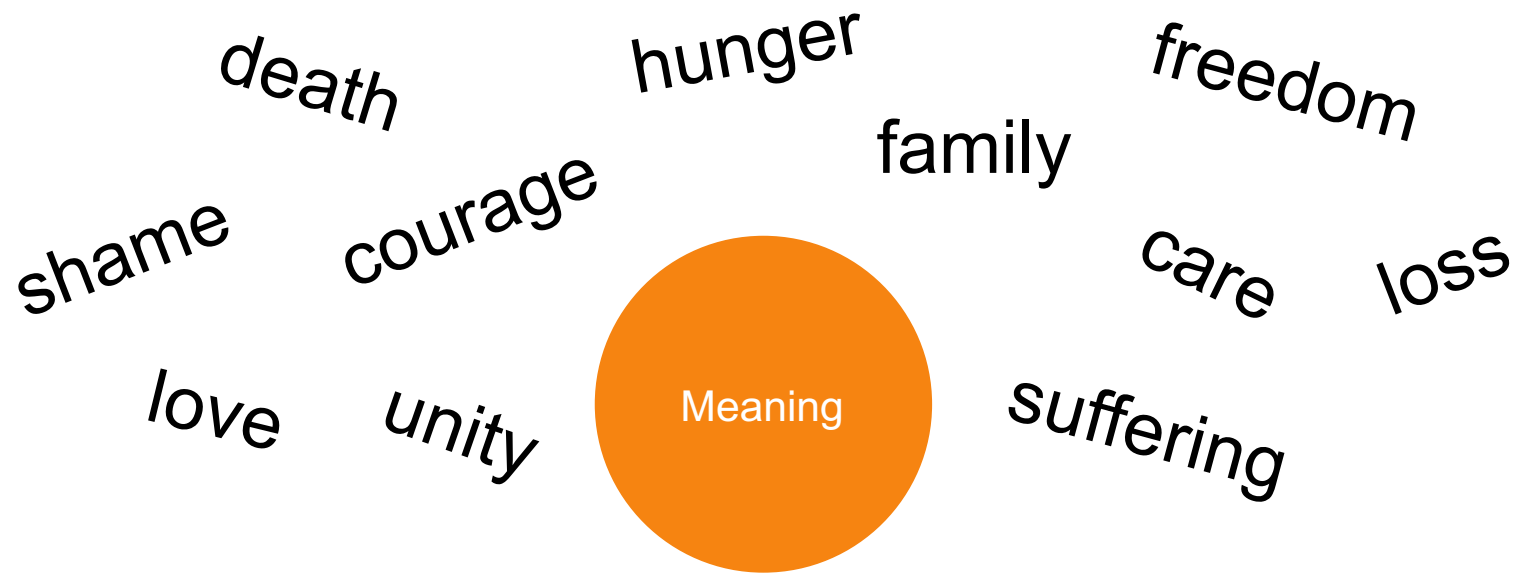
## **Evaluation question:**

What should we do if we want to keep the Plane tree as a key feature in our landscapes?



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# Meaning: What really matters



Universal concepts are meaningful to almost all people around the world.

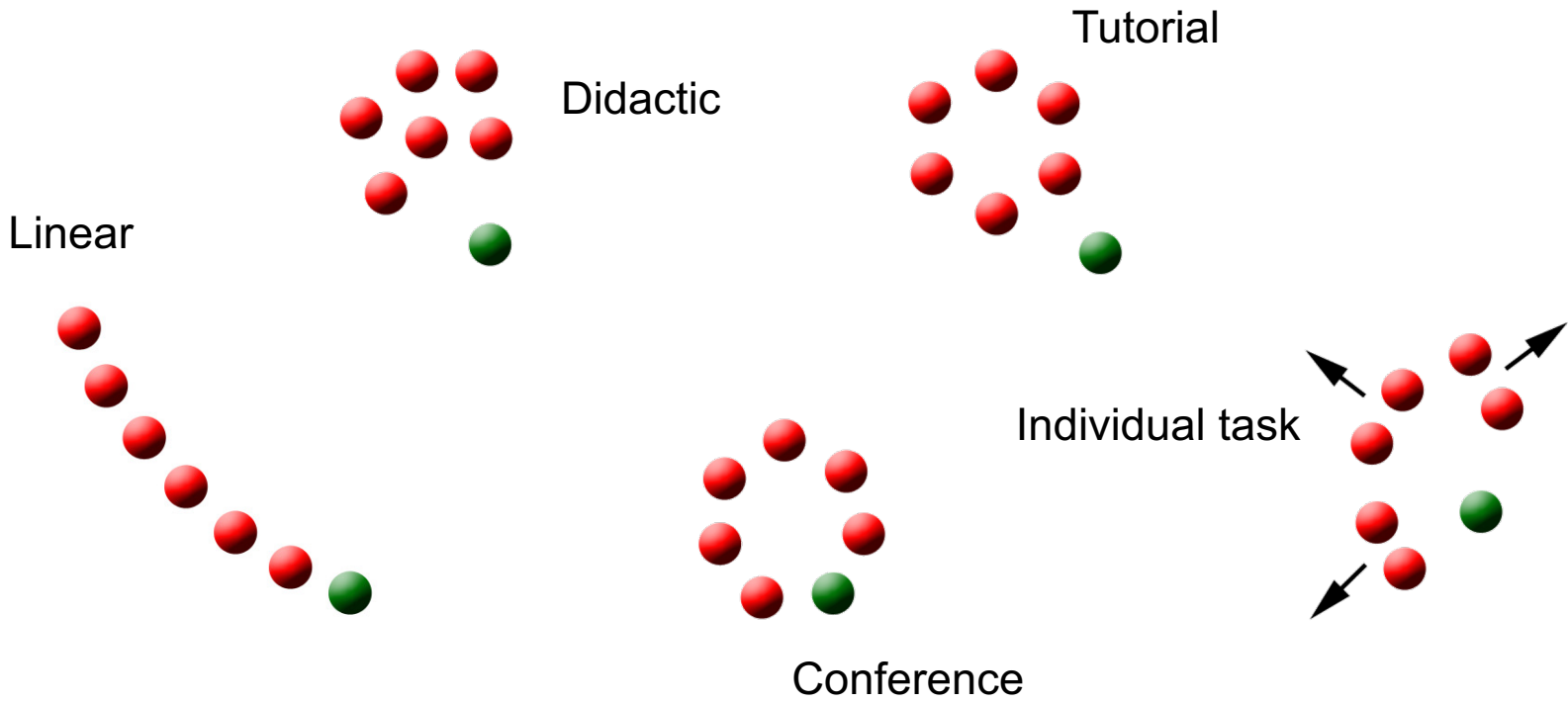
*Brown, D. (1991) Human Universals. New York: McGraw-Hill*



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# Formations



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# Vocabulary roots

- Thesis-theme
- Thesis: defend an expression of opinion
- Theme: more nuanced, broader, multiple opinions



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# Developing a theme

A theme shows the way –  
But not the precise path to follow.

The star that guides the ship...



... or a lighthouse

For the interpreter as uch as for  
the visitors or participants



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# InHerit



*Tilkin, G. (ed.) (2016)*

*Professional Development in Heritage Interpretation.  
Bilzen: Landcommanderij Alden Biesen*

*[www.interpret-europe.net/inherit.html](http://www.interpret-europe.net/inherit.html)*



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**Thank you**

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