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Framework for a Storytelling Festival

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Framework for a Storytelling Festival

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Introduction

This is a descriptive framework for the implementation of an international, multilingual storytelling festival. The model of the Alden Biesen International Storytelling Festival, Vertelfestival, near Bilzen, Belgium was analyzed. To better my understanding and learning on how to organize a storytelling festival, I attended the nine-day storytelling festival held April 14-22, 2008 for the first five days.

The 13-year-old storytelling festival is one of the largest in the world. In 2008, 19,500 tickets were sold. There was 200 hours of story telling by 36 domestic and international professional storytellers, hired to tell stories in their first language. The stories, in seven languages, didn't rely on special effects or translation. They were simply told, appealing to the imagination of the listener. During the weekdays of the festival, the program targets local students and adult language learners, with over 100 schools sending 16,000 students. The weekend programs are designed for families. The Vertelfestival held at Alden Biesen Castle in Belgium, is about lifelong learning. It is called the festival of languages.

Data Sources

Data sources come from observations, interviews, texts, artifacts and media products, the setting, the environment, the event and

happenings.

1) Observations

I was invited to the festival and given permission by the festival coordinator to directly observe any of the story telling sessions and to develop an understanding of the context in which the project operates. It provided direct information about storytellers and the participants. Through observation, I had an opportunity to identify unanticipated outcomes. Attending the festival during the summative phase was useful, to determine if the project was successful.

2) Interviews

Through interviewing, I was able capture the perspectives of the project organizers, storytellers, and participants of the event. Face to face in depth interviews, characterized by extensive probing and open-ended questions, were useful. It provided the opportunity to explore topics in depth and experience the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of responses.

3) Texts, artifacts and media products

Published and unpublished materials including virtual ones were given to me by festival organizers and storytellers.

4) Setting and the environment

I was able to collect virtual, visual and sensory data on the castle by my presence.

5) Event and happenings

Visual and sensory information was collected from observing and participating in the storytelling sessions in English, French and Spanish. I observed adults, university students and school age children. In addition I had permission to eat lunch with the children in their lunchrooms and be with the storytellers in their common room.

History of the Festival

The annual Alden Biesen International Storytelling Festival that

began in 1995 was initiated by Guy Tilkin, who has been the coordinator of a number of European projects and networks in education and training mostly in project management. Now he manages all of the cultural events at Alden Biesen with European Commission support. The administrative responsibilities of the Alden Biesen Story telling festival are divided between: a director, program coordinator, head of school programs, head of weekend programs and head of adult education program.

The purpose of the festival is to be “a place for second and foreign language learning and literature to be brought alive through exposure to authentic language via high quality storytelling for all ages” (Tatsuki, 2008). The festival hires professional story tellers from around the world and has become an extremely popular event that keeps growing.

The festival was designed to provide an environment for an intercultural learning experience through language and content. Stories for children were told in languages other than their first language, using an immersion approach. Listening to stories told in the target language is the goal. None of the stories at the festival are translated. Translation would distract learning in this context. The stories are viewed as the storytellers, not the translators. Organizing a sustainable storytelling festival in the region reflects the commitment of the organizers to foster multiculturalism through language and literature, as lifelong learning.

Language Policy

Belgium as a member of the European Union (EU) views multilingualism positively. Goals of the multilingualism policy in the EU, outlined by the European Commission (2008) include: “encouraging language learning and promoting linguistic diversity in society; promoting a healthy multilingual economy; promoting social integration though improved knowledge and acceptance of languages.”

Since 2002, the Council of Ministers adopted a goal to have every citizen in addition to their mother tongue acquire two foreign languages. This has driven policy to promote language learning in education programs. An Action Plan “Promoting Language Learning and Diversity” adopted a three point plan in 2003: first to promote language learning as a lifelong activity from pre-school to old age; second to have quality in language teaching; and third to create an environment conducive to learn language in.

The following 5-sectors under the EU’s Lifelong Learning Programme show support for languages:

- 1) Early language teaching — introducing foreign languages at a young age can result in faster language learning, improved mother tongue literary skills, and better performance in other areas.
- 2) School education — such as joint projects of classes in different countries (under Comenius). There is also EU financial support available for teacher mobility.
- 3) Vocational education — under Leonardo the EU supports methods and materials for language learning, and methods of validating language skills in the vocational sector
- 4) Higher education — the Erasmus programme includes intensive language preparatory courses for students wishing to study abroad
- 5) Adult education — through Socrates/Grundtvig, the European Commission helps adults improve their competences, including language skills, so that they can adapt to changes in the labour market and society. (European Commission, 2008)

The storytelling festival at Alden Biesen was already established before the European Commission integrated various educational and training initiatives under the single roof of the Lifelong Learning



Figure 1. Alden Biesen Castle

Programme. The storytelling festival is an example of how the EU's commitment to life long learning goals and objectives can be put into good practice.

The storytelling festival is held at the historic site, Alden Biesen Castle (see Figure 1), originally built by the German Teutonic Knights in the 16th century (Landcommanderij Alden Biesen, 2008). The castle with a moat, church and gardens is about one hour and forty minutes from Brussels, Belgium. After a fire in the castle in 1971, the Belgian government has taken over the management. Parts of the castle's interior were reformed into a conference center, with 21 rooms that hold from 5 to 300 people. It is now a traditional but modern facility with wireless internet access; 30-room accommodation with 65 beds; food services; and a parking lot. The grounds are very large, suitable for outdoor activities with space to put up large tents holding over 150 people, as there were for the festival. At night the walkways are lit. It is a picturesque and safe environment. The beauty of the castle, steeped in history is a perfect setting for a storytelling festival.

Since 1986, the castle has functioned as a cultural center for the Flemish community and has been a European center. The European Commission's Socrates and Leonardo programs since 1995, have brought many activities, to the center including; projects, seminars, in-service training, classes colloquia and networking.

The castle rooms have many different shapes and sizes, and the height of the ceilings also vary. In addition to the rooms in the castle, for the festival, two large tents were set up with wooden floors, a raised platform at the front, chairs and portable heaters. In most rooms, the storyteller and the participants were at the same level. Only the large rooms had an elevated stage. In the rooms, participants sat on chairs facing the storyteller. Storytellers used wireless microphones in larger spaces. The rooms all had names and there was a map provided. A staff member was assigned to each storytelling venue and could be seen before, during and after the sessions. The rooms of the

castle were left open during the day and often you could find storytellers rehearsing by themselves in empty rooms. Stories were only told indoors with the exception of a storytelling walk because the weather in the spring was still too cold to sit outside and listen.



Figure 2. A storyteller

The physical space for storytelling adds significantly to the ambiance. The “great cellar” in the basement of the castle, provided a perfect setting because of the shadows and gothic atmosphere, for an amazing performance of the entire original version of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, in two 45 minute sets by British storyteller, Ben Haggarty said to be one of the world’s best. His story telling skill in the setting left the listeners spellbound.

There were 36 storytellers from seven countries hired to tell stories, in 2008. Both male and female storytellers represented a range of ethnic groups, nationalities, ages and experience (see Figure 2). There have been over 170 storytellers that have participated in the festival, since 1995. Most storytellers specialize in certain age groups and repertoires vary between countries and languages. One of the storytellers at the festival is said to have a working repertoire of over 250 stories.

Stories told by a native speakers in the participant’s L2 offered cultural and language learning opportunities. Both the storyteller and the listeners had to work together to create meaning. The stories varied in length. Sometimes one story was told for the whole session and at other times there were many stories. Features that aided comprehension were the storytellers use of movement, sound that was not a word, song, gesture, facial expression, eye contact, and change of pitch and volume. In addition, storytellers were attentive to the

maturity level and interests of their audience. The key vocabulary storytellers used was repeated throughout the story and the complexity of the stories varied, depending on the age and L2 proficiency of the audience. The storytellers would sometimes verbally or nonverbally ask the audience for a response during the story. Listeners had to use their senses and background knowledge to create meaning. Many storytellers used instruments like a bell, drum or recorder to signal change. The storytellers all started their performance very powerfully with their voice or an instrument.

The message of the stories appealed to the age group. Groups of teenagers were often asked by the storytellers what kind of story they would like to hear. Then based on the student's response, a story was told. Storytellers every year that come to the Belgian festival marvel that teenagers' participate. In many countries, just children and adults listen to stories at festivals. Teenagers at the Vertelfestival loved the creepy, romantic, and thrilling stories. Even though the storytellers have told the same stories many times, when we heard them, they always came across fresh and new.

The storytellers were willing to share information about themselves, different festivals and groups in the world and educational initiatives. When they were not performing, they watched other storytellers tell their stories. The more experienced storytellers were supportive of younger artists and could be seen giving them feedback after their sessions. There was good camaraderie between the storytellers. Eric Borrias, head of the storytellers union in the Netherlands, provided information on various publications and other well-known and well attended international festivals:

- * Beyond the Border-Cardiff, Wales [first weekend July] <http://www.beyondtheborder.com/>
- * Scottish Story Telling Festival— Scottish Story Telling Center, Edinburgh [October]—coordinator Donald Smith <http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk/>

- * Cape Clear Festival—Cape Clear Island, Ireland [September] <http://indigo.ie/~stories/>
- * Festival at the Edge (FATE)—Shropshire, UK [end of July] <http://www.festivalattheedge.org/>
- * International Storytelling Festival, Aachen, Germany [November]
- * Market for Performance Arts—Oslo, Norway [May] <http://www.norwayfestivals.com/arrangement.cfm?ID=15&SID=11>
- * Gratz Story Telling Festival-Austria [June]
- * March 20th is World Storytelling Day.
- * An example of a story telling magazine Vertel Eeens Magazine www.verteleens.eu.

The Festival Organizers and the Storytellers

To have sustainability for a festival, partnership with the storytellers needs to be planned carefully by the organizers. Storytellers deliver the product to the audience; therefore it is vital to have a network of contacts and relationships, and available funding. It is necessary to identify storytelling organizations and storytellers and a mutual interest needs to be created. Trust must to be established as cooperative action always carries a risk. There needs to be a belief that the parties will keep to their agreements.

The Alden Biesen storytelling festival being international and multilingual has structural characteristics such as geographical distance, language and intercultural differences that need understanding. Organizers must have intercultural sensitivity and be able to invest in people outside of their own culture. It is critical that storytellers' needs are taken care of at the festival so they can concentrate on their job to tell stories.

Guy Tilkin, head of the storytelling festival was highly visible in his leadership role. During the festival he lived at the castle with the storytellers, and could be seen at the end of sessions talking to teachers who brought their students and storytellers to get first hand

feedback. He also ate with the storytellers and spent time talking to them in the common room. When storytellers arrived and departed, he was there. The festival organizers provided transportation to and from the castle for the storytellers. Not only did the head of the festival provide the guiding vision, but also he could be seen continuously guiding and influencing behavior in positive ways. Guy Tilkin showed visionary leadership with his continuous monitoring and evaluating.

At this festival, the storytellers had room and board on site at the castle. There was a common room where everyone gathered to eat meals with the organizers and relax. There were drinks and snack food available there throughout the day for the storytellers. The Vertelfestival organizing committee's goal is to bring back 50% of the same storytellers every year and then introduce new talent. Organizers spend time at other festivals and storytelling events looking for talented performers to come to Alden Biesen.

While planning, organizers have to consider the number of performances a storyteller presents a day. Storytellers at Alden Biesen were scheduled to tell stories for a maximum of three sessions or three to four hours per day. Each storyteller was contracted to do sessions over a consecutive number of days. Working contracts between storytellers were negotiated individually and conditions depended on their country, experience or agency they work for. Many storytellers work for companies and agencies. There was a continuous rotation of storytellers with Very few of them staying for the whole festival.

Storytelling Festival Target Groups

The target groups for the storytelling festival are school children, university students studying to be teachers, teachers, adult language learners and families. Most participants were from the local area. Anyone who wants to attend the storytelling festival's programs

Table 1 2008 Storytelling Festival Programs & Fees

Nine-Day Program	Fee in Euros
School Groups 1) Kindergarten- Secondary Monday-Friday & Monday-Tuesday (4 sessions/day) 2) University, Teachers, Adult Learners Wednesday & Friday 13:00 3) Adult Evening Programs Tuesday-Thursday Storytelling 19:30	2.5/session
Wednesday & Saturday Storytelling Workshop 18:00-21:00	8
English Story Night Friday Evening 20:00	8 (adults) 6 (under18/over 60)
Carrousel Storytelling Saturday Evening 20:00	10 (adults) 6 (under18/over 60)
Aperitif Storytelling Sunday Morning 11:00	12
Groot Festival Sunday Afternoon 14:00-18:00	2.5

must purchase tickets in advance (Table 1). Tickets are limited due to available seating. The fees are reasonable according to participants and organizers. Posters and brochures are used to advertise locally. Dates for the festival are set over a year in advance. Many programs are also limited by age and some are only open to school groups. There is an internet site with contact information <http://www.alden-biesen.be/empaginas/culttoeractiviteiten/index.php?activiteitID=155&seizoenID=1> (International Storytelling Festival Alden Biesen, 2008).

Local schools are sent registration forms to complete. There is a choice of storytellers, languages, dates and times. Lunch room reservations and snack and drink orders must also be made. Age is the criteria for participants to choose what they can register for.

Transportation for Participants

Individual schools cover expenses and arrangements for transportation. All students are transported by school buses for the school program. Other festival participants are responsible for their own

transportation. Public bus service is not convenient. There is free parking in a parking lot across from the main entrance to the castle.

Food Services for Participants

a. School Lunch System

Rooms for school groups to eat lunch were organized and planned in advance. There were up to 7-lunch rooms set up for groups between 21-400 people. Everyday the number of seats in the lunchrooms needed to be counted. Temporary canteens were often set up by the organizers (see Figure 3). For groups under 65, their own staff or volunteers catered. External caterers were called in for larger groups. Drinks could be purchased, but snacks had to be ordered by the school in advance. Benches and tables were set up for children to eat together with their school and often other schools. There were toilets facilities and places for garbage. Teachers supervised their own students.

There was an official schedule for school lunches everyday that outlined:

- * Place
- * School's present
- * Number of students
- * Worker's names and responsibilities (A minimum of three staff were scheduled to work in every lunchroom.)

b. Adult Participants

There was no food service available at the castle for adults. Immediately outside the castle grounds there was a restaurant open for lunch and dinner.



Figure 3. Lunchroom in Alden Biesen Castle for school children

The Program

There were two main parts to the program; the weekday and the weekend. On the seven weekdays of the festival during the mornings and afternoons, there were three programs. One was the school program for preschool, elementary, junior high and high school students; another for teacher trainees and the third for teachers.

In the evenings during the week, there were also three programs. One was for adult immigrants learning Dutch as a second language; another for Belgian adults who study other languages; and third a workshop for storytellers. The innovative programs on the weekend open to the public included an English Story Night, Carrousel Storytelling, Aperitif Storytelling and a Groot Festival for families

Weekday School Programs

During the day, school programs were offered for seven weekdays, Monday to Friday and then the following Monday and Tuesday. In 2008, over 16,000 tickets were sold to students and 110 schools came to listen to stories.

The school program (Appendix 1, Alden Biesen Vertelfestival, 2008) allowed time for students to arrive by bus from their schools. Students stayed a half-day or full day. One morning was designated for kindergarten and elementary school children. There were six-90 minute story telling programs to choose from per session. On another morning there was a similar program for third grade. Children under 16 listened to stories in Dutch.

For secondary school students, everyday there were four sessions. Two were in the morning at 9:45 and 11:00 and two were in the afternoon from 13:15 and 14:30, except on the final day when there were only three sessions. For each session there were up to eight different storytellers. There were 27 sessions in total. Several different schools were often at one session, with teachers accompany-

ing the students. The maximum number of students taking sessions at one time was over 900. The language the stories were told in were; Dutch, French, English and German

One daily schedule for each session for the festival organizers included:

- * Time
- * Place, storyteller's name with the language of the session
- * Staff member assigned to the site
- * Total number of students and the name of the schools
- * Number of students from individual schools.

This schedule format was helpful for the organizers.

Another daily schedule for the storytellers included:

- * Storyteller's names
- * Grade level and foreign languages
- * Times of the sessions
- * Places were listed if the storyteller was presenting
- * Number of participants.

Storytelling for Teachers

Language teachers had an opportunity to listen to stories in languages they teach as a second language. There were stories in English, French, Spanish and Italian. The stories could be taken back with them to their classrooms.

University Teacher Trainees

This was an English workshop in storytelling for undergraduate teacher trainees in an Erasmus/ EU/ teacher-training programs. The students were training to be teachers in early childhood and primary school. The 27 students at the 2008 workshop, were in a course for three months at a Belgian university. They represented 6-nationalities in the EU as all students are expected to go abroad to study for at

least 2-weeks. It was a multinational European group, using English as their common language in the workshop.

Adult Night School

Workshops

For two evenings, there were English storytelling workshops in two three hours sessions from 18:00-21:00. A storyteller worked with a group of fifteen adults. Many of the participants belong to story telling clubs or are people who generally are interested in developing their story telling abilities. The storyteller told stories and worked interactively with parts of the story. At the end of two workshops, the final product was telling their own story.

L2 Storytelling for Belgians

In the evenings there was storytelling for Belgian Dutch L1 adult language learners in; English, French, Spanish, Italian and German. I was able to attend Nilo Berrocal's storytelling in Spanish. The audience of 285 were community members and night school students of Spanish as an L2. For 90 minutes without any break, the storyteller told a series of interconnected contemporary stories.

L2 Storytelling for Immigrants

Stories were told in Dutch for second language learners. As minorities, they are a recognized part of the learner community.

Weekend Program

The weekend program consisted of state of the art innovative programs including an English Storytelling Night; a Storytelling Carrousel Evening Program; Aperitif Storytelling and a Groot Festival

English Story Night

English Night is a highlight of the festival and more than 100 people were turned away from this event, in 2008. Three storytellers; Ben Haggarty, Nick Hennesey and David Ambrose took turns telling tales to an audience of very appreciative adults. The program was two hours long starting at 20:00 in a large castle room with a stage. It had the relaxed atmosphere of a nightclub, with a cash bar and chairs arranged around small round tables. This arrangement fostered communication. Participants were observed talking to one another across the table, not just to the person next to them before and after the performance, and during intermission. Participants were encouraged to get refreshments prior to the show and then again during intermission. During the opening and closing ceremonies English was used. This again showed that other languages are valued for communicative purposes.

Carrousel Storytelling Evening Program

The participants in Carrousel Storytelling register to be a part of a group of 60. They move together to hear 4-stories for twenty minutes each. The stories are combinations of different languages including Dutch(D), German (G), English(E), and French(F). The participants were put into three story groups; DDEE, DFGF, DEEE and moved to the storyteller as a group. There were 8-storytellers: 4-English speakers from Canada, Great Britain and the USA; 1-French speaker from Brussels; 1-German speaker from Germany, and 2-Dutch speakers from Holland. The program was from 20:00-22:00.

Aperitif Storytelling

Aperitif Storytelling was open to the public on Saturday. Participants came to enjoy a drink at 11:00, while listening to 5-storytellers tell stories in English, French, Dutch and Flemish. The English-speaking storytellers came from Great Britain and Canada.

Groot Festival

The Groot Festival is open to the public on Sunday from 14:00-18:00. In addition to storytelling indoors, there was an outdoor festival set up with different performing artists and story walks. There were 23 storytelling sessions set up for 30-40 minutes around the castle for different age groups from three years old. Stories were told in Dutch, English, French and German.

Conclusion

The state of the art Vertel Storytelling Festival at Alden Biesen Castle is a successful existing initiative that can provide guidance on how to build a framework for an international and multilingual story telling festival. The festival has success factors for sustainability with the organizers ability to: build relationships with the storytellers and the community; access funding; hold the festival annually at a historical site; and foster educational policies that are linked to lifelong learning goals of the EU. This has been a start in forming network partnerships; networks about learning; and networks about shaping policies and practice for a storytelling project.

I would like to thank Guy Tilkin, Katrijn Beelen and the storytellers for the valuable time, openness and support they gave in helping to network and explore potential areas of cooperation and learning. Also I am grateful for the support of my colleague Dr. Donna Hurst Tatsuki who told me about the festival and attended it with me in 2008.

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Vertelfestival 2008

PROGRAMMA SCHOLEN (program Schools)

Maandag 14 april

- programma gericht op de eerste en de derde graad secundair onderwijs
4 sessies: 9.45u — 11.00u — 13.15u en 14.30u
- Maaseik: 10.00u — 11.15u — 13.15u en 14.30u

Dinsdag 15 april

- programma gericht op de eerste en de derde graad secundair onderwijs.
4 sessies: 9.45u — 11.00u — 13.15u en 14.30u
- 19.30u: programma voor avondschole: Duits, Spaans en NT2

Woensdag 16 april

- programma gericht op kleuters, basisonderwijs en derde graad secundair onderwijs
- BaKO
4 sessies: 9.15u — 10.40u — 13.00u (enkel BaKO) — 14.15u (enkel BaKO)
- 13.30u: programma voor de lerarenopleiding Lager Secundair Onderwijs: EN-FR
- 13.00u: workshop Erasmus.
- 18.00u — 21.00u: workshop vertellen door Nick Hennessey (2de sessie op za. 19/04)
- 19.30u: programma voor avondschole: EN-IT

Donderdag 17 april

- programma gericht op derde graad secundair en hoger onderwijs
4 sessies: 9.45u — 11.00u — 13.15u en 14.30u.
- 19.00u: start master class met Jan Blake
- 19.30u: programma voor avondschole: EN-FR

Vrijdag 18 april

- programma gericht op de derde graad secundair en hoger onderwijs
4 sessies: 9.45u — 11.00u — 13.15u — 14.30u
- doorlopend: master class met Jan Blake (t/m zondagmiddag 20/04)
- 13.30u: programma voor de lerarenopleiding Lager Secundair Onderwijs: EN-FR

Maandag 21 april

- programma gericht op het basisonderwijs en BaLO
4 sessies: 9.45u — 11.00u — 13.15u — 14.30u (enkel BaLO)

Dinsdag 22 april

- programma gericht op het kleuter — en het basisonderwijs
3 sessies: 9.45u — 11.00u — 13.15u