

TEACHING AND LEARNING NOTE

STORYTELLING FOR FESTIVAL EXPERIENCES: A TEACHING AND LEARNING NOTE FOR THE SPECIAL ISSUE, *FESTIVALS AND STORYTELLING*

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For event management success, event management students must understand and develop skills relating to storyline development for festival (and event) experiences. However, as this teaching and learning note explains, students may not be fully developing their theoretical understanding and how to apply that understanding in practice due to their growing reliance on non-academic online resources. Teaching notes offer practical guidance for delivering and teaching various topics but are not often directed towards students. This article adapts the traditional teaching note to highlight this issue and offers a dual teaching and learning note to better support student learning and skills development.

Key words: Festivals; Storytelling; Experience; Teaching note; Learning note

Introduction

Over the last decade, scholarly discourse concerning the value of event management courses, particularly in the UK, has shifted in parallel to the changes occurring in university learning. Nearly 10 years ago, Kashef (2015) reported concerns for event management courses, citing arguments of event professionals who found recent graduates to be unprepared for industry. Much of

these arguments were framed around the notion that event management university courses placed importance on theory over practice, and thus recommendations were made for teachers to employ experience-based learning (Kashef, 2015). Such arguments were not new, as others (see, e.g., Barron & Leask, 2012; Bladen & Kennell, 2014; Robinson et al., 2008) earlier argued experience-based learning not only allows for students to develop both understanding and skills required for enhanced

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employability, but also to gain a better sense of the reality of working in event management. This thinking stems from Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which put forward the notion that experience and reflecting on experience are important factors for student learning. Developing this, Gibbs (1988) argued students learn best when they are given a structured learning activity within which "learning by doing" takes place. According to Gibbs (1988), "it is not enough just to do, and neither is it enough just to think. Nor is it enough simply to do and think. Learning from experience must involve links between the doing and the thinking" (p. 14). Actively engaging students in their learning through doing, and then thinking about what they are doing as they are doing it, allows for a deeper and lasting understanding that they can implement later in their careers (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Healey & Healey, 2019). It is from this understanding that universities have been redesigning their event management curriculum around experiential learning, of which numerous scholars have reported as a beneficial change for enhancing students' understanding and employability (see e.g. Askren & James, 2021; Sox, 2021; Walters, 2021). However, bridging the gap between thinking and doing for event management students remains incomplete as recent studies have indicated student facing challenges with course materials.

Most event management courses adopt theoretically underpinned textbooks as core reading materials (see, e.g., Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020; Bladen et al., 2023; Dowson et al., 2022; Getz & Page, 2020). However, textbooks are often dense with information, covering a broad range of event practice topics, including planning, design, logistics, operations, and management, as well as outlining a wide range of event types, event characteristics, and PESTLE-related impacts for events. Although textbooks are useful for gaining a broad understanding of event management practice, studies indicate student apprehensions towards textbooks for a variety of reasons, including that they are too broad in focus, outdated, and/or not written for bilingual learners (Goldie et al., 2023; Keiper et al., 2023; Vlachos, 2020; Xie & Qian, 2023). Indeed, more research is needed to comprehensively assess student preferences, use, and satisfaction of event management course materials. Nevertheless, scholars have called

for more publications that are topic specific, student focused, and that offer practical teaching and learning guidance for event management (see e.g. Butler & Duchac, 2023; Everett et al., 2020; Stadler, 2024; Venske, 2021).

Within event management literature, there are a range of teaching notes that offer guiding frameworks for teachers to apply experiential learning relating to student-led event activities and/or specific aspects of event management, such as conducting health and safety risk assessments (see, e.g., Agha et al., 2012; Holm & Breiter, 2017; McGill & O'Halloran, 2016; Roberts et al., 2018; Rossetti, 2023; Tsai et al., 2024; Wyatt et al., 2023). However, what appears lacking, are topic-specific guiding articles directed towards students and student learning (Everett et al., 2020; Stadler, 2024; Venske, 2021), which could supplement the array of core textbooks students are generally directed to use. This is significant lack considering some students find textbooks overwhelming (Shi et al., 2021; Strong et al., 2014), and thus revert to online source materials, such as event management websites and YouTube content. On this matter, Genota (2018) reported there is a growing preference among Gen Z students in particular for online content, as it generally offers straightforward information through informal and easy to understand descriptions. Adding to this, and in review of the range of sources tourism students used for research and assessment preparation, Shi et al. (2021) found online resources (internet search, social media, video content) were preferred when compared to textbooks. Textbooks were further reported as less preferred when compared to lecture notes, general news, journal articles, and supplemental materials (Shi et al., 2021). Yu and Xu (2023) also found students to prefer online and digital media, citing some as perceiving textbooks to be less intuitive for their learning style that emphasizes visual over text. Although more research is needed on the preferences of event management students, Genota (2018) explained the danger of reverting to online content is to do with the content's reliability and the impact of misinformation on student learning and knowledge development. Topal and Shargh (2023) argued this concern is enhanced by the fact that many students are ill-prepared for assessing the reliability of online sources, including academic journal articles.

While online event management websites, including the global ticketing platform *Eventbrite*, offers quick and useful topic-specific information, it is important for students to see the benefit in using reliable academic sources (in print or digital form) and not downplay their theoretical significance, which, when applied in practice, enhances their employability (Fletcher et al., 2022). Given the above stated issues with core textbooks, more academic articles that guide teaching *and* learning of specific event management topics are needed to enhance the current breadth of academic resources for reliable student learning. As such, and to conclude the *Event Management* Special Issue: Festivals and Storytelling, the remainder of this article serves as a teaching note, but more precisely, a “learning note” for students tasked with creating a storyline when planning and designing a festival (or event) experience.

Teaching Note

The Module Lesson

This teaching note draws on the teaching and learning activities concerned with storyline development of an undergraduate event management module. As a foundation module in year 1, the intended learning objectives are for the students to develop a basic understanding of event planning and design, which they will then develop and apply in a subsequent live event delivery module in year 2. As part of the students’ final assessment to propose a hypothetical festival or event, they were tasked with developing a clear storyline. As Barron and Whitford (2004) suggested, to support the students’ in this process, they were given a range of visual aids and practical tools to facilitate their learning, including a variety of storyboard examples and a blank storyboard template to work from. Case studies were provided and discussed in groups, drawing the students’ attention to the thematic designs and meta-narratives of, for example, the *Black Deer Festival* in Kent, UK and the *Lost Village Festival* in Lincolnshire, UK. To develop their storylines, the students were asked to consider their festival’s vision, mission, message, underpinning themes, and intended audience experiences, which Dowson et al. (2022) explained as essential

for keeping attendees interested and creating memorable experiences. These storyline subtopics were individually presented through lecture content and accompanied with pause points that allowed the students to develop these elements of their festival’s storyline, and thus apply their learning as they were learning it. Through this, the students actively engaged in what Gibbs (1988) called “learning by doing.” Following the lecture, student learning by doing was further supported through a structured seminar activity in which each group was tasked with creating a storyboard of the audience experience before being asked to present their ideas for formative feedback.

Learning Outcomes and Objectives

In following the subsequent learning note, students will be able to:

1. Describe and assess the value of storytelling for successful event planning.
2. Demonstrate the knowledge and skills necessary to produce a storyline that will facilitate a successful festival experience.
3. Take an active approach to thinking creatively and in coordination with others.

Target Audience

The subsequent learning note is suitable for undergraduate students, but can be useful for postgraduate students, tasked with creating a storyline for their intended festival or event. The reading material listed below will support the students in understanding the importance and function of storytelling for festival experiences, as well as the varying elements and steps needed to be taken for storyline development.

Teaching Instruction

Successful festivals are framed by a creative concept and design, which together are reliant on a clear storyline that blends narrative with imagination (Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020). Event management students must learn how to create memorable festival and event experiences, which is arguably framed by their understanding and skills of

creating an effective storyline (Getz & Page, 2020). Teaching storytelling and story-building for festival experiences therefore requires learning by doing. Such teaching not only supports a deeper learning experience, but also helps students to overcome resistance and/or nervousness towards engaging with the visual methods needed for story-building (Chen, 2024). Providing students with an experiential learning opportunity to develop an event concept, create an overarching storyline, and test its appeal for implementation is a meaningful way to enhance student learning and develop their employability skills in relation to event planning and design (Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020; Walters, 2021).

To create a storyline successfully, students must be given step-by-step practical guidance (see below) and story-building tools (see below). Upon starting, students should revisit their festival's five Ws (why, who, what, when, where) and consider varying market research (Dowson et al., 2022). Creating attendee personas will help them to better visualize how attendees may engage with the festival experience (Visocky O'Grady & Visocky O'Grady, 2017). For students struggling with creative thinking, reflective learning techniques (e.g., Mind mapping; Think-Pair-Share; Story-mapping) can be used to prompt student thinking about the festival experiences they have had and/or heard about in an attempt to inspire new ideas (Davies et al., 2024; Healey & Healey, 2019). Once students have drafted their storylines, the students should be encouraged to present informally for formative peer and teacher feedback. Peer feedback in the form of three stars and a wish is encouraged for positive and constructive support (see, e.g., Biggs & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2010).

Learning Note for Students

Theoretical Background

Storytelling is an essential component for the design of festival experiences (Richards et al., 2014). Within the context of festival and event experiences, stories are based upon the intended vision and mission of the experience and woven into every facet of the plan and design, including the theming and aesthetic design, branding and marketing activities, entertainment choices and experience opportunities

(Dowson et al., 2022; Iverson et al., 2023). Event management literature may refer to storylines as the festival concept (Bladen et al., 2023), narrative (Getz & Page, 2020), theme (Dowson et al., 2022), or message (Jang et al., 2024). Because of these variations, understanding storytelling for festival experiences may be difficult to grasp. However, an agreeable perspective is that the storyline creates a distinct and meaningful representation of the intended vision and mission, which, as Ironside (2024) and Orea-Giner et al. (2024) explain, is embedded in the festival's promotion, production and experience to create an authentic and memorable experience. An example of such storytelling is offered in Leonard and Whitfield's (2024) descriptions of 1940s heritage festivals in which a staged environment is created through story-backed and period-inspired audience activities and entertainment. Mixing in memorabilia, theming, and immersion via live reenactments help to create a deeply unique and memorable experience that is supported by 1940s themed promotional material, merchandise and activities reinforcing the overarching 1940s storyline (Dowson et al., 2022; Leonard & Whitfield, 2024).

Practical Guidance for Festival Storytelling

Developing a storyline follows a standard process (see Table 1) of research, creative design, formative assessment and implementation (Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020).

Step One: Research. The first step in story-building is to conduct research drawing the five Ws of event planning: *Why* is the festival being held; *Who* will be in the audience; *What* are attendees going to be experiencing and/or doing; *When* is the festival happening; *Where* is the festival occurring (Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020; Dowson et al., 2022). Market research is also important to review at this stage. Event planners can conduct research on attendee demographics (i.e., statistical data relating to the cultural, economic, and social characteristics of market segments) and psychographics (i.e., statistical data relating to beliefs, preferences, lifestyles, and personality traits of market segments) (Visocky O'Grady & Visocky O'Grady, 2017). This

Table 1
Story-Building Process

Activity Stage	Considerations	Resources
Research	Why is the festival happening? What is the festival vision and mission? When and where will the festival be? Who will be coming to the festival, and why? What will they, or should they, expect to experience?	Five Ws Market analytics Demographics Psychographics Attendee personas Competitor profiling
Design	What will the festival look like? What will it sound, smell, taste, feel like? What colors will be dominant vs supporting? How will text and signage be used? How will people engage with each other and the experience?	Color psychology Mood boards Sketching Mind-mapping Storyboarding Scenario planning
Assessment	What do other event team members or colleagues think? What does the target market think? What could be enhanced or added? What could be changed or removed?	Surveys Focus groups Interviews A/B testing Informal feedback
Implementation	Is the storyline relevant and feasible? Where is the story being implemented (marketing, live experience, merchandise)? Will there be room for change or adjustment? How will you assess post-experience?	Five Ws Scoping review Scenario planning Attendee feedback Staff feedback

Note. Source: Author, adapted from Antchak and Ramsbottom (2020, pp. 43–50); Visocky O’Grady and Visocky O’Grady (2017, pp. 66–101).

information is useful for revealing a target market’s motivations, preferences, expectations, and needs of a festival experience. It can also be used to create attendee personas (i.e., a representation of market segment), which are useful for scenario planning and speculating how different attendees may respond to varying aspects of the festival storyline and experience (Visocky O’Grady & Visocky O’Grady, 2017). At this point, students are encouraged to visit subsection Tools for Story-building (below) for an example attendee persona and practice creating a few for their intended festival or event.

Step Two: Story Design. Following, and drawing on the research undertaken in step one, imagination and creative thinking can occur to shape a storyline for the festival experience (Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020). This “festival tale,” as Wood et al. (2024) explain, requires event planners to consider the festival’s ethos (i.e., the festival’s brand credibility and character), pathos (i.e., the festival’s emotional and/or affective appeal), and logos (i.e., the festival’s reasoned message or point of view). Such considerations will help students (and event planners) to

communicate the key values and message intended by the festival experience. For example, the *Black Deer Festival’s* storyline is crafted around “a celebration of music, Americana, and the great outdoors” (<https://www.blackdeerfestival.com/>).

It may be useful to break the storyline into manageable components, which Baker (2024) describes as including a clear narrative structure, the roles of actors involved (attendees, staff, volunteers, performers, vendors), and the experience atmosphere. This echoes Antchak and Ramsbottom’s (2020, pp. 46–47) guidance, which suggests:

- Crafting the core idea for the story: Consider—What is the intended message or idea attendees should gain from the experience? What is the overarching theme guiding the story? How does the narrative, actors and atmosphere relate to the story? Are there substories within and how do they relate? How does the story reflect the audience journey from entry to exit?
- Identifying the main actors: Consider—Who will come to the event and why? What do they want and need from the experience? How will they

engage with the experience and interact with others within it?

- Create highlight moments: Consider—What will attract attendee attendance? What will keep attendees engaged and interacting? What could cause attendees to leave early? What will create lasting memories and impressions?

If struggling with creative thinking, Bladen et al. (2023) suggested imagining the story happening. At this point, students are encouraged to close their eyes and imagine the festival experience they envision. What does it look like? Are there bright colors and flashing lights with smoke filling the air of an open field? What does it feel like? Is the ground dry and hard under one’s feet? Does the air feel crisp or warm? Does it feel crowded or nicely spread out? What does it smell like? Is there bonfire smoke or food aromas filling the air? What does it sound like? Is there loud music or people laughing? What are people doing? Is there dancing or games? Are there queues of people at food and drink stations? What and where are the story’s narrative being delivered? Is it in the signage and merchandise?

Are people talking about it? Is it in the colors and decorations? Once students can imagine the experience, they should start writing it down, which may be enhanced through storyboarding (see below). Such efforts support Antchak and Ramsbottom’s (2020) argument that using one’s imagination to mentally construct a storyline can support students in developing the story components on paper.

Step Three: Formative Assessment of the Story. Once a storyline is developed, students (and event planners) should run a formative assessment to test its appeal and intended effectiveness before implementing it within the festival plan and design (Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020). This can be done by sharing it with peers, colleagues, and other event planning professionals, as well as by undertaking audience development research, which allows for feedback from the target market concerning the story idea (Visocky O’Grady & Visocky O’Grady, 2017). For student-led events, talking to other students on campus about your festival ideas can provide greater insight into how your storyline might

Attendee Persona

<p>Photo</p> <p>Draw or insert a photo of someone to serve as a visual aid for the attendee persona.</p>	<p>Attendee Bio</p> <p>Write a short bio about who this person is. Although this is a fictitious person, they should be representative of real attendees within the target market.</p>	
<p>Demographics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is this attendee? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is their name? ○ How old are they? ○ Where are they from? ○ How much money do they earn? (This is useful for determining how much they may spend at the festival) 	<p>Psychographics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe this person’s character? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is their lifestyle like? ○ What are their habits? ○ What are tastes and/or preferences? ○ What are their beliefs and/or opinions? ○ What are their personality traits? 	<p>Festival experience scenarios</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes this person an ideal attendee? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Why would they come to the festival? ○ What would they engage with? ○ What would they not engage with? ○ What types of marketing and advertisement would they respond to? ○ What would they spend money on?

Figure 1. Attendee personal template. Source: Author, adapted from Visocky O’Grady and Visocky O’Grady (2017, pp. 68–69; 90–91).

be received. Traditional qualitative research methods, including interviewing and focus groups, can be used in this endeavor, as well as quantitative methods, such as surveys and questionnaires. Comparative analysis using A/B testing (see Visocky O'Grady & Visocky O'Grady, 2017, p. 76) and visual methods, such as story-mapping (Davies et al., 2024), are innovative methods that can also be employed. Formative feedback through audience development research (i.e., talking to potential audience members about the festival storyline and plans) is important to not only ensure the festival is

designed with attendees in mind, thereby enhancing their sense of inclusivity and attachment (Kennell, 2024; McClinchey, 2024), but for also ensuring the implemented storyline and delivered festival experience will meet their needs and expectations (Visocky O'Grady & Visocky O'Grady, 2017).

Step Four: Implementation. Following the necessary review of the proposed storyline and after making any necessary adjustments following the audience development research, considerations



Figure 2. Mood board example. Source: Author, moodboard adapted from *Brown Beige Elegant Minimalist Aesthetic Moodboard* [Photograph], by Moodstore, 2023, Canva. <https://www.canva.com/p/templates/EAFaGp-ms1k-brown-beige-elegant-minimalist-aesthetic-moodboard/>. (1) From *Young and wild in Positivus Festival* [Photograph] by Kristis Luhaers, 2018, Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/a-woman-raising-her-arms-in-the-air-in-front-of-tents-DSB1MZWsGco>. (2) From *Woman Hat Cariocas Beach Bar* [Photograph], by Jason Blackeye, 2017, Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/woman-wearing-black-fedora-hat-1ShAuJTJIE4>. (3) From *Grüne Sonne* [Photograph], by Lukas Eggers, 2019, Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/people-walking-on-grass-field-aYttBtAu7zg>. (4) From *Ocean Beach* [Photograph], by Brandon Weekes, 2018, Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/brown-plant-selective-focus-photography-gAze2YAGneI>. (5) From *Northeast-partyhouse Golden Hour* [Photograph], by Danny Howe, 2017, Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/photos/photo-of-music-band-performing-at-front-of-crowded-stadium-under-blue-sky-zZxs1_uupOQ. (6) From *Guitar player in a garden* [Photograph], by Brandon Wilson, 2015, Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/person-holding-brown-guitar-outdoor-qzpzH2Nfmky>. (7) From *Festival outdoor colorful flag decoration* [Photograph], by rminedaisy, 2022, Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/a-pole-with-a-bunch-of-colorful-flags-hanging-from-it-iIW974wFYnw>

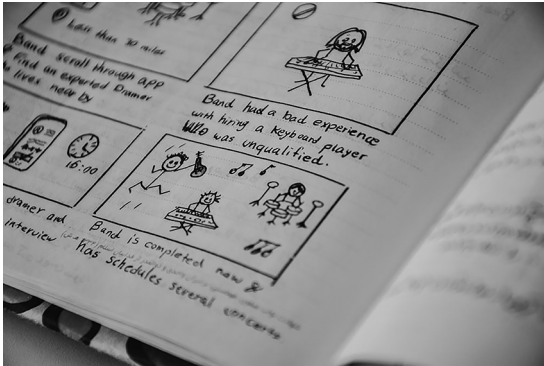


Figure 3. Storyboard example. From Unnamed [Photograph] by Nasim Keshmiri, 2023, Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/a-book-with-a-drawing-of-a-person-sitting-at-a-table-bNjYwZrkJ3A>.

for the confirmed storyline are needed before its implementation can be done. These considerations include, for example, its relevance and feasibility in line with the intended vision and mission; how it will be implemented across promotion, production,

and the production experience; if there will be further room for adjustments once implemented; and how the storyline will be evaluated during and post experience (Antchak & Ramsbottom, 2020; Dowson et al., 2022; Ironside, 2024).

Tools for Story-Building

Creating a story requires visual exploration, which Visocky O’Grady and Visocky O’Grady (2017) explained as a developmental process of visualization that brings a written narrative to life. Within the first story-building step of conducting research, attendee personas are a useful visual tool for clarifying representatives of the different target market segments (Visocky O’Gray & Visocky O’Grady, 2017). Figure 1 is offered to support students in creating attendee personas to support the story-building process.

Visual exploration tools for step two of the story-building process can include mood boards, sketching, mind-mapping, and storyboarding (Dowson

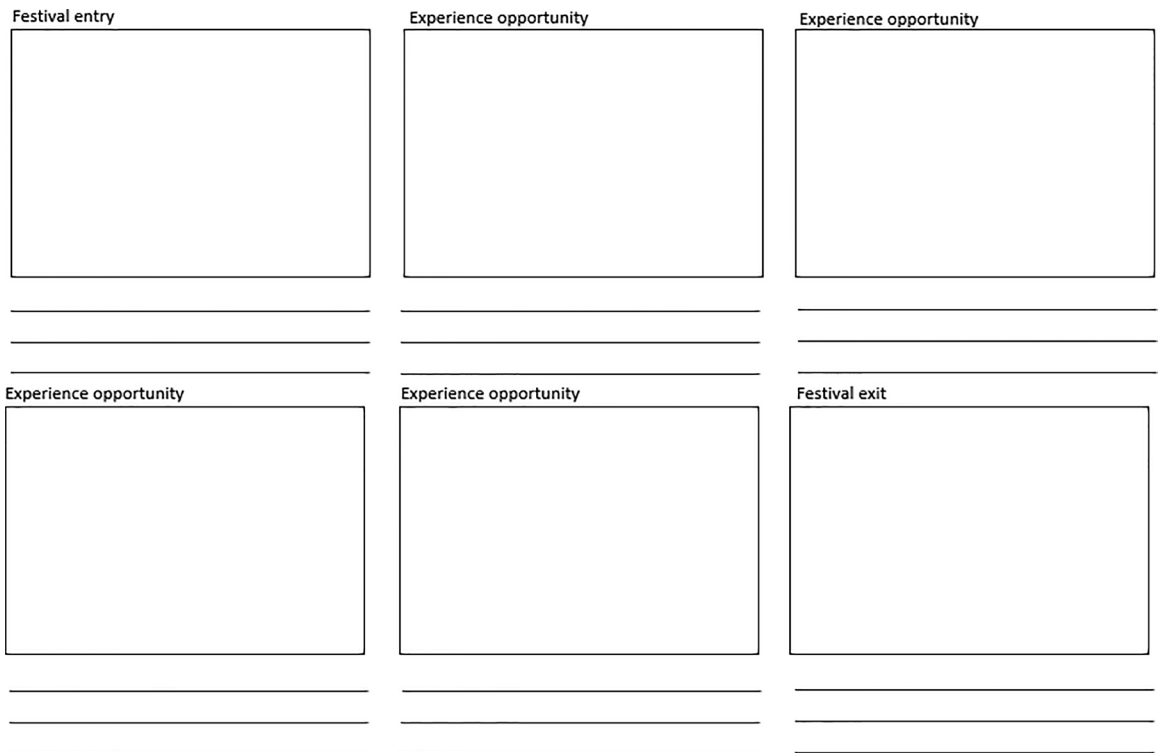


Figure 4. Storyboard template. Source: Author.

et al., 2022; Visocky O’Grady & Visocky O’Grady, 2017). Mood boards (see Fig. 2) are an easy way to capture a story idea or to convey a storyline using a collage of images, colors, and/or textiles (Dowson et al., 2022). However, storyboards (see Fig. 3) are useful for building a story journey using narrative and visual representations (Visocky O’Grady & Visocky O’Grady, 2017). A basic storyline should consider, at minimum, the attendee experience upon entry and exit of the festival, and several experience opportunities in between (i.e., entertainment, activities, food and drink, engagement points). Figure 4 is offered for students to practice storyboarding for their festival storyline.

Recommended Reading

In addition to the articles of the Special Issue: Festivals and Storytelling and the references listed for this article, students are encouraged to use the below recommended readings, which offer practical step-by-step guidance for story-building, in addition to a directed focus on the value and meaning of storytelling for memorable festival experiences.

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