

LEGENDAROOM MULTIDISCIPLINARY OVERVIEW: EDUCATION CENTRE, CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION METHOD AND TOURIST ATTRACTION

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***Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to present a model of a multidisciplinary, cross-sectoral approach of education, cultural preservation and tourism. It reveals certain key elements of its successful implementation and results as a creative educational storytelling initiative with notable outcomes in cultural preservation and tourism development as well. Being a unique model and having some specific features, the LegendaRoom has proved to be a highly impacting tool both as a method of non-formal education, a means to protect, preserve and transfer items of intangible cultural heritage as well as a captivating tourist attraction. The author of the paper proposed and implemented this model between 2014 and 2016 in the Land of Hateg, Transylvania.*

***Keywords:** education, cultural preservation, tourism, storytelling, model*

Introduction

Humans are storytelling-based organisms, leading storied lives, both individually and socially (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). From ancient times, legends and stories were the primary method of education, and the storytellers were special members of the society, being required to develop memory and visualisation skills in order to paint a picture in the mind of their audience, to simplify complex issues and enhance their accessibility and meaning (Egan 1986). The interest for educational storytelling re-emerged in the USA in the early '90s (NCTE 1992) and spread around the globe. Today, UNESCO recommends the use of storytelling as core teaching and learning strategy under its "Teaching and Learning for a sustainable future" programme (Fien, Cox & Calder 2014).

As a means of information transfer, it was studied by scholars (Gershon & Page 2001), with findings indicating a high impact on learning (Eck 2006). It was assessed that listeners become engaged when stories or legends are told and therefore remember (Mc Drury & Alterio 2003), being able to imagine new perspectives, thus inviting a transformative and empathetic experience (Rossiter 2002). It was also stated that storytelling can be adaptive for all ages, leaving out the notion of age segregation (Atta-Alla 2012). Human brain's response to stories and legends facilitates learning and memory, specifically for

social information and by comparing different approaches of storytelling it was stated that the used model of story delivery is of the utmost importance (Badawood & Wood 2012).

A Romanian NGO called SENS - the Society for Nonformal and Social Education, of whose activity I manage pro bono for over a decade, followed these educational psychology premises in order to develop LegendaRoom, a new interactive concept of non-formal education with direct impact on tourism and culture, responding primarily to the need of preserving endangered aspects of local intangible cultural heritage but also to the need for a structured and efficient tourism education. The pilot project was implemented in the Land of Hateg, Transylvania, between 2014 and 2016.

The Land of Hateg – Where Legends Live

Situated in the South-West of Transylvania, The Land of Hateg is one of Romania's richest places in natural diversity and density of historical monuments and vestiges (Muntean, 2012). In the early 2010's the tourism and tourism-related activities in the Land of Hateg were still at their beginning. Even though the need for tourism development was high and all the resources were available, neither the authorities nor the other local stakeholders developed or implemented a coherent and integrated tourism strategy. Just as almost all over Romania, the lack of a structured and coherent national programme of tourism education has left its mark.

In 2013, after years of direct assessment on the needs of the population, research and analysis on the strengths and opportunities of the land, SENS - the Society for Nonformal and Social Education proposed, for the first time, to the Romanian Ministry of Tourism, an integrated branding and tourism promotion model of The Land of Hateg, based on the one element linking all the features of the region – Legends (Vesa & Muntean 2013). Unfortunately, soon after, the Minister was changed and the proposal was forgotten by the new authorities. With no public or private support whatsoever, SENS decided to implement it anyway, using the limited resources and funds available and counting on the voluntary involvement of its members. After three years of hard work, "The Land of Hateg – Where Legends Live" became not only known as a successful, yet unofficial, branding and tourism strategy of a Romanian micro-region, but it was also academically recognized as best practice model in the scientific research magazine of the University of Bucharest (Vîlsănescu 2016).

When promoting a brand, one has to make sure that the brand promise is respected and the very tangible benefit that makes the brand desirable exists and is available to the clients. In this case, the brand tag line was also the brand promise: "Where legends live". The challenge for the volunteers of the Society for Nonformal and Social Education was to deliver meaningful legends and to find the best way to reach their maximum potential impact. This is how it was

done: in 2014 SENS continued to collect data regarding legends, tales and myths from the Land of Hateg. Interviews with locals from several villages were conducted, field visits to local museums and tourist attractions were made and a thorough research of the available specific literature was done. We have discovered three main categories of legends and folk tales: legends about some historical and/or fantastic events and people, legends about natural monuments and/or wildlife and legends about dinosaurs and/or fantastic creatures. Hence, the next step was to group them in three sub-brand categories: #Legends of the People, #Legends of the Nature, #Legends of the Dragons (SENS 2015). However, the majority of these legends are mainly grouped in the first category - #Legends of the People, and mostly recall heroes and events throughout the history or talk about local monuments – citadels, churches, castles.

An unusual as well as alarming finding was that a large amount of legends recorded in the literature were forgotten by the locals or corrupted so badly that the original message was completely altered. We have understood then the risk of losing a huge immaterial cultural heritage, endangered by oblivion and contamination with modern cultural features. According to UNESCO guidelines in terms of intangible cultural heritage – this heritage thrives on its basis in communities and depends on those whose knowledge of traditions, skills and customs are passed on to the rest of the community, from generation to generation, or to other communities (UNESCO 2011). So, what to do when the transfer inside the community is poor and when there are less and less people with knowledge of the old legends?

LegendaRoom

In the struggle to respond properly to these two major needs identified through our research, namely the huge need for an immediate preservation of the legends as highly endangered elements of the local intangible cultural heritage and the need for an efficient and structured tourism education, we have developed a creative and unique approach – the LegendaRoom – meant to be, at the same time, an education centre, a cultural heritage preservation method and also a tourist attraction. We designed it as an exhibition with legends. A room looking more or less like a museum, presenting characters from local historical legends – with their clothes, weapons and objects – as described in tales and folklore, depicting their actions, adventures and accomplishments on large wallpapers and telling their stories, visually through graphics and photographs and also verbally, by a storyteller, with an accent on the lost or forgotten cultural aspects. To summarize it, a LegendaRoom has two major components: the visual component, given by the legendary characters and the legendary context (outfit, position, posture, objects, visual framework) and the emotional component, given by the way the legends are told. It takes some storytelling skills and educational abilities to build the chronological construct

of the plot of the legend and to know how and when to use the objects and the props in order to have a strong educational impact.

A LegendaRoom cannot be considered a history museum, as they are generally defined, because it holds no original artefacts but replicas and creative interpretations of legendary objects. It also does not present accurate history facts and events but merely their remembrance in the local folklore and their echoes through time, as well as unconfirmed hypothesis about historical figures and circumstances. It can though be considered a real museum of legends, because it consists in a collection of items and objects related to a series of local legends, of cultural and artistic importance, serving the general public. We describe it by saying that it is a place where the legends of the land are presented, a unique exhibition holding some of the most interesting and captivating tales, a place where the past goes hand in hand with myths and fantasies, where one can discover ancient treasures, learn about events that shaped the faith of medieval Europe and find about secret genealogies of kings and emperors. It is a journey through folk magic, fierce creatures and a pathway through the epic ages of The Land of Hateg. Not least, we draw attention to its non-scientific character stating that all the information within is presented as legend and legends are tales of fantastic, fabulous or miraculous adventures or events, that may have a real historical background, but all the re-interpretations of history are yet unconfirmed hypothesis (SENS 2015).



Photo 1. Characters from local legends in the first LegendaRoom

The first LegendaRoom was opened in May 2015 in the village of General Berthelot and it was called “Terra Hatzak Legendarium”. Inside, 10 of the most spectacular legends of The Land of Hateg were presented: the treasure from River Strei, the Battle of the Iron Gate, the Black Mask, the origins of Johannes Hunyad and of Sultan Mehmed Fatih, the brave Lady Ilene from the

Coltz Citadel, the Kendeffy-Windsor genealogy, the tale of Lady Saphira, Cicioane the Striga, Lupu the Werewolf (Muntean, 2015). The financial sustainability of the exhibition was ensured by establishing a small entry fee and a gift-donation system, meaning that the visitors who chose to make a donation would receive a gift, a handmade souvenir related to the legends and produced by local volunteers (clay amulets, coin replicas, maps of the Land of Hateg, leather and copper bracelets, manual paper with a wax seal, etc.).

Throughout the summer of 2015, in only four months, albeit being at its beginnings and without having any previous notoriety as a tourist attraction, it was visited by more than 1000 tourists and by a few hundred locals. As an extension to the exhibition and using it as a catalyst, we organized archery classes, outside the LegendaRoom, for local children and youth, stressing on the importance of learning their local legends and of preserving the local folklore. Using the props from the exhibition, other educational activities with organized groups of young tourists were also developed. Some villagers understood the importance of our work and joined our endeavours. They helped us gather other tales of myth and legend from senior locals of the commune and even old, almost extinct Christmas carols and sayings. Together with a list of regional words from the Land of Hateg that we have gathered throughout the years, these findings of special intangible cultural heritage are a part of a future planned project of cultural preservation and education.

The impact and the success of the LegendaRoom, during the first year of implementation, exceeded our expectations. The word spread very quickly after the opening, and tourists from all over Romania and even foreign tourists from Hungary, Germany, Italy, Holland and United States heard about it and came to visit, eager to learn about the local legends. The feed-back received from the visitors was overwhelming and a large number of tourists left written testimonials of their experience, in a guestbook. All of these testimonials are rating the LegendaRoom as a high standard exhibition, a great tourist attraction, an excellent museum, a friendly educational environment, a unique cultural conservation initiative and much more.

Given the success of the concept, in autumn 2015 we started the development of a second LegendaRoom in the nearby village of Sarmizegetusa, the former antique capital of the Roman province Dacia Felix. Other spectacular legends from the Land of Hateg but related to the village's history and traditions, were chosen to be told in this location: the Roman victory at the Iron Gates, the Roman torture chamber, the Roman games, the Red Knez of Britonia, the Battle of Waskapu, the archaeological findings of Szofia Torma, the White Emperor and the Dragon.

This second exhibition was extensively supported by locals from the Land of Hateg, as they realized the importance of the huge impact it has on the education of their children, on the preservation of their local legends and even

on attracting new tourists and visitors. Some people donated money, a local carpenter helped with a part of the necessary wooden props, a blacksmith forged a couple of replica weapons, others volunteered to do the needed pottery and to help arranging the exhibition and many locals advertised the LegendaRoom on social media.



Photo 2. Props and exhibit items of the second LegendaRoom created by local craftsmen

In this location, the available space was much more generous and it allowed widening the range of our educational activities. Meanwhile, authorities and institutions learned about the existence and the success of the LegendaRoom and proposed partnerships. Together with the school from the commune of Sarmizegetusa, we have developed an educational project of learning and building ancient Roman games. The students designed and built an outdoor space with two Roman games – Delta and Mill/ Merrills, right next to the LegendaRoom and therefore even won a prize awarded by the Hunedoara County School Inspectorate.



Photo 3. The outdoor Roman Games space created by local students

In the spring of 2016, upon request, the annual meeting of the teachers from the Land of Hateg was held at the LegendaRoom. They were taught about the importance of storytelling in the classroom and about the huge treasure of intangible cultural heritage represented by legends. Some of them had never used legends to illustrate the lessons and some, even if they were locals, had never heard of particular legends or tales. Moreover, the concepts of experiential education and peer education had no special meaning for them, and the idea of bringing direct experience into the learning environment as a part of the teaching process and of having focused reflections on that experience, at peer level, in order to gain knowledge and skills or to clarify values, seemed for them, in the beginning, a bit out of place. One of the most debated and therefore controversial features of the educational activities held in a LegendaRoom type museum was the use of the props, replicas and even clothes.

Whilst in the classical museums there is forbidden even to touch the exhibits, in the LegendaRoom it is highly recommended to touch and even to handle and learn how to use some of the props, like swords, shields, bows, pottery, flintlocks, jewellery, coins and hats. It is not only of great attractiveness both for children and adults, but it also helps the educational process by creating the atmosphere, by allowing the visitor to sink into a world of legend where he/she becomes the legendary hero using a particular tool or item. After experiencing the feeling of using legendary objects while being captivated through storytelling and surrounded by legends, the teachers all agreed that the impact and the level of results achieved through this model of education is significantly higher than the classical classroom teaching and expressed much interest in future collaborations regarding interactive classes for their schools.



Photo 4. Teachers learning legends and experiencing the use of ancient legendary weapons

In the summer of 2016, the Hunedoara County Library proposed a partnership and offered to fund and to equip a new LegendaRoom focused on books and fantastic legends. Having some extra space next to the previous exhibition, we designed a room where some fantastic characters of local myth and legend could “emerge” from within the books and tell their stories to the visitors.

Fierce dragons, long-forgotten emperors, unusual werewolves, kidnaped princesses and famous thieves were brought to life inside this new exhibition that was highly appreciated by the tourists and locals alike. Having a library with a reading room designed and arranged to instantly submerge you into a world of legend has proven to be extremely helpful to the educational process, because the visitors, children and adults alike, are much more open to the suggestion of reading a book, after learning the legends of some fantastic characters or creatures they were made curious about when seeing them amongst the books.



Photo 5. The Black Mask, a fictional local hero and thief, next to the books in the LegendaRoom

During the entire year of 2016 a large number of educational activities took place at the LegendaRoom. Schools from all over the Land of Hateg, from Hunedoara County and even from other regions of Romania requested educational activities. Many tourists, organized groups, families and individuals, domestic and even foreign, from countries as far as Australia came to visit the LegendaRoom and to learn about the local legends.

News about this educational centre and tourist attraction was presented in the media, both on local and national newspapers. From the information we have so far, this model was only used as inspiration for a small exhibit combining history and legends related to the ancient Dacian treasures. However, taking into consideration the continuous lack of substance and coherence of the Romanian national strategies, both in education, cultural

preservation and also tourism, it is of no great surprise the little interest shown by the national and regional authorities in replicating this success model of non-formal education, cultural preservation and tourist attraction on a wider scale.



Photo 6. Storytelling about legends and archaeological discoveries, for children from a local school

Conclusions

The educational, cultural and tourism-related aspects of a LegendaRoom are tightly bonded together. Without the cultural challenge of the intangible local heritage (local legends) preservation or without the need for a healthy tourism education and even without the sustainability given by its tourist attraction specific features, there would not have been a LegendaRoom. So, it is rather obvious it cannot be treated or analysed otherwise than multidisciplinary, as a whole, a mix of education, cultural preservation and tourist attraction. Naturally, it has clear particularities and it presents certain future opportunities in each of the three different domains.

From an educational point of view, it stands for all the educational psychology premises upon which it was built, and even more, it can be a solid basis for a future educational psychology research regarding the influence of storytelling in changing some particular behaviours, especially in the range of learning behaviours. Furthermore, the current worldwide concern about environmental issues is connected with the revival of the educational interest for storytelling, since folktales and legends about the relationship between the Earth and its human inhabitants have been at the heart of storytelling since earliest times. Not only do such stories offer a source of inspiration for environmental education, they also contain a potential for understanding the many ways in which we value and devalue the nature (Gersie 1992).

From a cultural point of view, it is clearly a very successful method of preservation and transfer of local lore. It follows the UNESCO guidelines regarding the specifics and the protection of intangible cultural heritage and it is extremely appealing to the public. It has the potential not just to preserve and transfer the cultural heritage inside a community but also to transfer it to representatives of other communities and thus not only to protect a local immaterial legacy but to make it known to the world. It is also a great and inspiring way to design a reading room from a public library, especially one for children, because giving the child the opportunity to experience a “real” meeting with some legendary characters and to touch their objects and clothes could definitely act as a catalyst for developing a passion for literature and for reading in general.

From a tourism development point of view, this concept of education centre, cultural preservation method and tourist attraction may very well be a model for improving the general policies of tourist information centres worldwide. While in a classic visitor centre or tourist information centre it is customary to find mainly information about routes, places, events and other tourist-related features, the creative use of legends, upon the model of a LegendaRoom, may be the next step in the development of a sustainable and attractive tourism. There are some countries and states where one can find a small educational exhibit or artefacts displays within a visitor centre, but the creative use of legends is still very limited. What we propose is to change the design of the tourist information centres into that of a LegendaRoom, because each and every tourist attraction from anywhere in the world has to hold at least a tale or a story if not a real epic legend and this story is its most important asset for tourism, because people travel not only to visit places but to learn the stories of those places, to walk on traces of legend and to live legendary experiences. Inside a visitor centre a small exhibition containing one to maximum three local legends could easily be set up, with a modest initial investment, creating the premises for growing the visitors’ interest about the place, for preserving in a sustainable way the local folklore and also for educating both the locals and the visitors about the intangible cultural heritage the place holds.

Being a concept, an idea, the LegendaRoom model has no copyright and it’s thus available to be used anywhere and by anyone for free. It offers a win-win approach for anyone interested in development, education, culture and tourism, requiring only a vision and the willingness to do it.

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