

Transnational training framework for Cultural Routes staff

Focus: Digital and Creative Skills for the European Cultural Routes

Supporting the Digital Transition of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe

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Introduction

Developing digital and creative skills among staff working on the European Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe is essential for strengthening the visibility, accessibility, and impact of cultural heritage in Europe. This training program adopts a practical and targeted approach, bringing together hands-on learning and sector-specific content tailored to the needs of cultural tourism and heritage interpretation. Core themes include storytelling, community building, digital media strategy, immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality, gamification, and the emerging applications of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The program is structured to be flexible and modular, enabling staff with different professional backgrounds and levels of digital literacy to progress at their own pace. Real-world case studies from various Cultural Routes, opportunities for peer learning, and cross-border collaboration are fully integrated to ensure a relevant learning experience and to stimulate innovation throughout the Cultural Routes network.

1. The importance of digital and creative skills in Cultural Routes

Within the context of the European Cultural Routes, continuous professional development through upskilling and reskilling is essential, particularly in digital and creative competencies. Today's tourists are increasingly digital, engaging with destinations through online platforms, social media, and immersive experiences. To reach these audiences effectively, Cultural Routes must be present and active on the channels where travellers already are.

Cultural Routes play a vital role in preserving shared heritage, intercultural dialogue, and supporting local economies through cultural tourism. As digital and creative landscapes evolve, the professionals working within these routes must evolve with them. Strengthening their skills ensures that Cultural Routes remain relevant, engaging, and sustainable in a rapidly changing environment.

1. Adapting to Digital Change

Digital technologies are reshaping how heritage is documented, presented, and shared. Upskilling supports professionals to:

- Create and manage digital content.
- Use digital platforms and communication tools to increase public engagement.
- Preserve cultural materials through digital documentation and archiving.

2. Strengthening Creative Skills

Creativity is essential to cultural interpretation and visitor engagement. Reskilling enables professionals to:

- Explore new storytelling methods using multimedia, performance, and design.
Apply contemporary artistic and communication techniques to cultural presentation.
- Work collaboratively across sectors to develop fresh, engaging cultural experiences.

3. Building Long-Term Capacity

Sustainable Cultural Routes depend on knowledgeable and adaptable professionals. Continued learning helps to:

- Maintain high standards in management, curation, and visitor services.
- Remain competitive in both cultural and tourism sectors.

- Strengthen the long-term impact, resilience, and innovation capacity of Cultural Routes.

The training modules provide Cultural Routes staff with the necessary digital and creative skills to innovate and enhance the attractiveness of the routes. With this new knowledge gained, Cultural Routes staff learn how to enhance the visibility of the Cultural Routes at local, national, and transnational levels, attract a broader and more diverse audience, and strengthen their network of stakeholders.

2. Understand digital and creative skills gaps in Cultural Routes

The future of digital and creative skills in the (cultural) tourism sector is closely tied to the sector's evolving trends and the growing importance of digitalisation and technology. The NEXT ROUTES project adapts to these changes by embracing digital tools and educating Cultural Routes staff to meet the sector's evolving needs effectively. New digital skills will play a pivotal role in enhancing customer experiences, promoting cultural tourism, and ensuring the sector's continued growth.

Gathering and unveiling the skills needs is the main objective of the NEXT ROUTES research analysis, as included and substantiated in this manual. It is developed by Breda University of Applied Sciences to support Cultural Routes to identify, assess, and monitor skills needs in order to make strategic choices to eradicate skills gaps for future-proof Cultural Routes in the EU.

The research methodology that was adopted to identify such skills needs consists of a three-dimensional (mixed methods) approach. This was used to understand the needs, challenges and opportunities for training within every Cultural Route using interviews, a skills assessment survey and focus groups.

2.1 Interviews

The interview questions gathered comprehensive information from NEXT ROUTES partner organisations regarding various aspects of their operations, strategies, and outlook on training needs to guide Cultural Routes staff in upskilling digital & creative competencies. Specifically, the questions aimed to:

1. Gain insights into the Cultural Routes' background, culture, structure, strategic goals, and position in the industry.
2. Understand the Cultural Routes' perspectives on the future of tourism, tourism employment, and the emergence of new job profiles.
3. Assess the importance of digital skills and training within the Cultural Routes, including the most important digital skills, performance expectations, training opportunities, challenges, and success stories.
4. Identify the technologies, tools, and communication channels used by Cultural Routes, as well as any plans for future adoption.

2.2 Skills assessment survey

Cultural Routes invited the stakeholders in their network to contribute to this project by participating in a skills assessment survey about skills gaps and future skills needs to help us identify their training needs for upskilling their digital & creative competencies.

2.3 Focus groups

Focus groups are organised to gather qualitative data and insights from Cultural Routes staff within the networks of Cultural Routes partner organisations. The objectives of the focus groups are to identify and prioritise key issues, challenges, and/or pain points experienced by the Cultural Routes staff, related to training creative and digital skills in Cultural Heritage and Cultural Routes. In particular, the focus groups covered the following topics:

- Exploration and discovery: to explore and understand attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and behaviours related to digitalisation and digital skills in Cultural Heritage.
- Idea generation: to generate new ideas, concepts, or solutions for training/upskilling and reskilling digital skills by tapping into the collective creativity and insights of participants.
- Feedback gathering: to collect feedback on existing challenges, needs, or learning concepts to identify strengths, weaknesses, areas for improvement, and potential opportunities.
- Concept testing: to test new ideas, criteria, success factors, opportunities and proposed solutions with the target audience to evaluate their acceptance, appeal, and viability.
- Prioritisation: to identify and understand different levels of importance and urgency within the stakeholders group, including common preferences, needs, and behaviors, to tailor training offerings accordingly.
- Decision support: to provide the focus groups with valuable insights and perspectives from the target audience to inform strategic decisions, such as training development, resources, strategies, or training levels.

2.4 Outcomes

The outcomes of the three-dimensional mixed-method research approach can be grouped into four key categories: **challenges, opportunities, training needs, criteria and success factors**. These insights reflect the current realities and the potential for growth within Cultural Routes.

Challenges

- Absence of a cohesive tourism strategy among members
- Reliance on a "learning by doing" approach for developing diverse skill sets
- Ensuring technology enhances—rather than diminishes—the cultural value of heritage
- Striking a balance between content that is shareable and customisable
- Adapting to emerging technologies despite the limited financial resources

- Addressing the balance between tangible and intangible heritage
- Shift the current predominant focus on tourism rather than culture
- Limited access to formal training and professional development

Opportunities

- Engaging younger audiences and fostering collaborations with external partners
- Leveraging immersive technologies and digital spaces
- Creating networks for collaborative content development and distribution
- Reimagining cultural tourism through certification and recognition mechanisms
- Attracting new members by adopting contemporary, digitally-informed approaches

Training needs

- Core digital competencies, including gamification, social media management, website administration, and virtual reality (VR)
- Practical training in basic digital tools for both visitors and contemporary culture creators
- Emphasis on ICT literacy and digital storytelling as key communication methods

Criteria and identified success factors

- Embracing a learning-by-doing methodology for skill development
- Using technology thoughtfully to amplify cultural heritage
- Balancing content customisation with shareability for diverse audiences
- Communicating the value of cultural tourism effectively, even with limited resources

2.5 Two-step rocket

After the identification of creative and digital skill gaps, the criteria were grouped into a structured framework, allowing key areas of development to be expressed and prioritised. Two matrices were completed by each Cultural Route, forming the basis of a shared “two-step rocket” model to guide future capacity-building and training design.

Output 1, Matrix 1 (Eisenhower Matrix): What within the Cultural Routes focus group is urgent and important? (using the internal interview analysis, best practices and survey results), Cultural Routes filled out this matrix during their focus group discussion to create the grid (output 2).

Urgent and important Top priorities, require immediate attention	Not urgent but important Important for long-term success but not urgent
Urgent but not important Seem urgent but not crucial for longterm goals	Not urgent not important Neither urgent nor important

Output 2: Grid

Cultural Routes identified the common terms and concept(s)/ideas for a successful adaptation of digital training within their focus group discussions.

Importance How critical is the training for achieving organisational goals?	Urgency How soon is this training needed?
Impact What effect will this training have on employee performance or organisational success	Feasibility What are the costs and what kind of resources will be required on to implement the training

All finalised individual grids and matrices from the Cultural Routes in the NEXT ROUTES consortium were analysed to make a construct and template for the set-up and content of the Training modules.

The NEXT ROUTES Training Modules are designed to equip Cultural Route staff with essential digital and creative skills, supporting the continued development and visibility of the routes.

3. NEXT ROUTES training and research topics

The approach and findings provide a useful basis for developing digital and creative skills training. Based on the input received, the following 4 training modules for digital and creative upskilling are developed:

1. Digital competencies for marketing, promotion and education

Focus on: Digital marketing approaches and practices, in the context of cultural tourism

Objective: To manage external communication; to reach out to a wider audience; to make the routes more visible and to make the information (really) interactive.

Focus points of attention: Designing and implementing a digital strategy, knowing the exact digital terminology to be able to interact more consistently with digital providers.

How: By training on the awareness of tools, programs, systems and channels and on how to select and use digital marketing solutions.

Learn how to use strategic tools for content management, marketing and promotion and creative tools to create graphic designs and multimedia visuals with engaging content.

2. Digital competencies for engagement and participation

Focus on: Online community management

Objective: To study the current route community (who is part of it, what they do, what they want/expect and how they want to be further engaged); to facilitate and manage internal communication within the existing community (both as online and offline community); to understand if there is an online-only community, who they are, what they expect from the route and how to engage them actively.

Focus points of attention:

- External: developing a social strategy, learn how to use the possibilities of digital tools, designing new ways to stimulate people engaging with the routes.
- Internal: train for cohesion with tools to connect the route managers as a community of practitioners. Local: introduce tools for local people in communities to use to raise local awareness and ownership.

How: By providing methods and models for it.

3. Digital competencies for Cultural Heritage promotion

Focus on: (Digital) storytelling and content selection

Objective: To understand what a good story is; to learn how to build a powerful story regardless of the digital platform (i.e., MRs, games, social media) by which it is told; to recognise how to design experiences for tourists and visitors by means of storytelling; to appreciate how to include the community and the network of stakeholders around a cultural route to make their hidden stories visible and accessible.

New tools like Generative AI are also introduced to understand how they can be best put to use in generating a good story.

Focus points of attention:

- Issues related to which story to tell, why to tell it, and how.
- How to build powerful stories that rely on empathy in order not just to inform tourists but mainly to touch them emotionally, the assumption here being that only by making them *feel* and not just *understand*, tourists will be able to develop a sustainable and durable connection with a place and pay it return visits (or encourage their social network to visit it).

How: By providing examples of best practices in using storytelling for mythmaking and tourist destinations from our own practice.

4. Digital competencies for gamification approaches

Focus on: Gamification

Objective: To understand how gamification works; to understand how gamification and games can be used to promote the route and to engage route visitors with the destinations; to connect with next-generation travellers; to understand the different types of games that can be used for this purpose.

New tools like AI are also introduced to understand how they can help customise the game experience.

Focus points of attention:

- Criteria to choose platforms, tools, and supports for the digital gamification of contents.
- How to involve oral testimonies to work on remembrance through gamification.

How: By providing theories, models, and examples from our own practice.

Other key insights that are used for developing the NEXT ROUTES training modules include:

- The need for practical, sector-specific training addressing real workplace challenges.
- Demand for flexible, modular learning formats tailored to diverse roles and experience levels.
- The importance of referring to best practices and case studies to ensure training relevance.
- The benefit of assessing existing skill levels before designing programmes to effectively target group gaps.

4. Modules, tools and resources

Keeping track of the rapidly changing skills needs and of bridging skills gaps to cope with a world in constant flux are major challenges for Cultural Routes in Europe. This involves not only the acquisition of new skills but also a mindset that is geared to life-long learning and the continuous reskilling and upskilling of competencies.

The NEXT ROUTES Modules are built around skills sets, gives ideas, examples and tools on how to improve digital and creative skills with the help of best practices, methodologies and supporting tools targeted to the staff of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe.

4.1 Module 1: Digital Competencies for Marketing, Promotion, and Education

In today's digital landscape, effective marketing, promotion, and educational outreach depend on strong digital competencies. This module introduces key skills and tools necessary to navigate the digital environment with confidence and strategy. This module provides essential knowledge to thrive in a digitally connected world.

1. Introduction and Theory

This module introduces key digital marketing practices tailored to the needs of Cultural Routes. As visibility, engagement, and sustainability become increasingly dependent on digital outreach, staff and stakeholders must strengthen their ability to promote routes through compelling storytelling, educational content, and strategic communication. Participants will explore how integrated digital marketing strategies can support the growth, visibility, and long-term relevance of Cultural Routes in Europe.

In today's digital age, smartphones and smartwatches have become indispensable companions for travelers. Tourists rely on these devices not only for navigation and capturing memories but also for instant access to cultural content, social interaction, and personal tracking.

The visibility and readability of content on small screens, especially while walking or multitasking, is a critical aspect of the user experience. Tech companies are constantly improving screen resolution, brightness, and camera quality to ensure a seamless experience without compromising engagement.

For Cultural Routes, this means that digital content must be:

- Easily accessible and quickly scannable
- Visually engaging, even on small displays
- Optimised for outdoor use and in-motion interaction

Creating content that adapts well to mobile devices is not just a convenience, it is a necessity for reaching modern audiences, especially younger, tech-savvy travelers. Artificial Intelligence (AI) marks a true milestone in the evolution of content creation. With breakthrough capabilities and unmatched speed, AI is revolutionising how we produce, refine, and share stories, especially across social media platforms. AI is the fastest content creation tool yet, transforming simple prompts into compelling narratives, bold statements, or nuanced messaging. Whether there is a need for content to feel enthusiastic, professional, serious, or all the above, AI adapts seamlessly to the tone and vision.

From generating fresh ideas to polishing a message with intelligent precision, AI empowers Cultural Routes staff to communicate more effectively and creatively than ever before. You bring the input, and AI brings the impact.

2. Topics Covered

This module introduces participants to key areas of digital practice relevant to marketing, promotion, and education. Key topics covered:

- Strategic digital marketing in cultural tourism
- Overview of trends, challenges, and innovations in digital promotion within the cultural tourism sector
- Identifying opportunities to amplify the impact of Cultural Routes using digital tools
- Multi-channel marketing strategies
- Understanding how to combine platforms such as social media, websites, email, and SEO to build a coherent campaign
- Importance of consistency and brand voice across channels
- Data-driven marketing
- Introduction to analytics platforms such as Google Analytics, Meta Insights, and email platform dashboards
- Using metrics to evaluate reach, engagement, and return on effort
- Emerging technologies in marketing
- Brief look at how AI tools, automation and content generation can streamline and improve digital marketing for Cultural Routes.

3. Activities

Hands-on activities are designed to help Cultural Route staff immediately apply what they have learned and produce tangible results when they return. By completing these tasks (and checklist), participants will strengthen their digital communication skills and contribute to their route's visibility and impact, by exploring their challenges and missed opportunities for low hanging fruit and promotional impact.

Preparation: Formulating the challenge

Identifying and addressing up to three challenges and opportunities of digitising the Cultural Route. This assignment helps to evaluate the position of the Cultural Route in the tourism landscape, analyse competitive context, and create a strategy for integrating or enhancing digital tools at relevant visitor touchpoints.

Preparation: Identifying the audience

This step is often forgotten or overseen, but a clear and also shared vision of the visitors' attitudes and behaviors is important for every new campaign and promotion. Cultural Routes were asked to use demographics, psychographics, culture, media behaviors, and if possible attitudinal/ behavioral/ media consumption habits to identify the audience they want to address.

- Step 1. Formulate objectives and key performance indicators
- Step 2. Formulate a one sentence strategy for communication (this helps to focus)
- Step 3. Formulate the execution of the communication strategy (select key channels, and work-out one campaign for three different channels)
- Step 4. Formulate budget allocation (how to still be effective with zero budget)
- Step 5. Formulate measurement and methodology (what tools will be used to measure impact and success, evaluate the landscape of tools and the NEXT ROUTES Toolkit)
- Step 6. Formulate how you can benchmark the effectiveness (pre and post campaign)
- Step 7. Formulate potential outcomes

4. Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- Develop a structured and goal-oriented digital promotion strategy for their Cultural Route.
- Choose the right digital (AI) tools (e.g., Canva, Genially, etc.) to design branded visual and educational content.
- Apply branding principles to ensure visual and narrative coherence across all outreach materials.
- Track and interpret basic performance metrics (e.g., likes, shares, page views, downloads) to assess the impact of promotional efforts and improve performance and reach.

5. Application and practice

This section outlines concrete steps to help Cultural Route teams implement digital tools and strategies in their day-to-day work. These practices aim to embed digital communication into operations and ensure ongoing learning, consistency, and impact.

Set SMART objectives

Define goals that are:

- **Specific:** What kind of content or engagement are you addressing?
- **Measurable:** What indicators (e.g., newsletter subscribers, Instagram followers) will you track?
- **Achievable:** Are the targets realistic given your team and resources?
- **Relevant:** Do these goals align with the route's mission?
- **Time-bound:** Set clear deadlines for evaluation.

Track progress using KPIs

Establish key indicators of success, such as:

- Number of social media posts or engagement rate.
- Growth in web traffic or mailing list sign-ups.
- Completion rates of digital training by team members.

Develop a succession plan

To ensure sustainability:

- Crosstrain team members with essential tools and processes.
- Maintain up-to-date documentation, and communication guidelines.
- Assign backup roles to avoid dependency on one person.

6. Case Studies / Best Practice

The Iron Curtain Trail is a strong example of how a Cultural Route can successfully use digital tools to promote engagement, education, and visibility. It combines a mobile-optimised website, interactive route planning, and storytelling to bring Cold War history to life. The route engages audiences through a mix of social media, downloadable maps, educational videos, and geo-tagged content, encouraging users to explore and share their experiences. By collaborating with local tourism boards, it runs targeted campaigns and uses analytics to track engagement and refine strategies.

It also integrates AI and automation tools to help generate and adapt content for different platforms, ensuring consistency and reach. The route's success lies in its clear objectives, cross-border partnerships, and its ability to connect history, tourism, and technology in a user-friendly, mobile-first format.

7. Templates, Tools, and Tutorials

To turn strategy into action, Cultural Routes need simple, effective tools that are easy to use and adaptable to their context. Inspired by best practices like the Iron Curtain Trail, this section provides ready-to-use resources to help teams plan, produce, and evaluate digital content.

Designed for practical use and collaboration:

- **Social media content calendar:** ideal to plan posts by channel, theme, campaign, and target audience.
- **Branding Cultural Routes kit:** to ensure consistency with fonts, colors, and logo use.
- **Digital communication strategy:** impossible to go without this strategy; Cultural Routes need to define the tone, values, responsibilities, and workflow.
- **Content creation checklist:** a step-by-step list to guide quality control for every post or campaign or promotion.

Recommended tools, especially for small teams:

- **Canva:** design branded content quickly, even without a design background.
- **Genially:** create interactive presentations, guides, or maps to engage online visitors.
- **Mailchimp:** build and track email campaigns that inform and convert.
- **Notion / Trello:** manage (cross-country) campaigns, deadlines, and team tasks in one place.
- **Meta Business Suite:** monitor Facebook and Instagram metrics to measure success.

4.2 Module 2: Digital competencies for engagement and participation

Module 2 focuses on developing the digital skills needed to enhance meaningful engagement and active participation across digital platforms. Learners will gain insights into foundational digital tools and strategies that support effective communication, community involvement, and broader outreach in both organisational and educational contexts.

1. Introduction and Theory

Engagement is at the heart of every successful digital strategy. For Cultural Routes and heritage initiatives, building meaningful connections with audiences goes beyond likes and clicks, it is about creating lasting relationships, inspiring action, and delivering value across every touchpoint.

2. Topics covered

The following areas highlight the full spectrum of engagement goals, from sparking initial awareness to enhancing loyalty and driving innovation. Each element plays a vital role in how Cultural Routes can connect with visitors, partners, and communities in impactful, measurable ways:

- Brand awareness
- Visitor engagement
- Lead generation
- Conversion
- Content creation
- Education
- Loyalty and advocacy
- Research and insights (profiling)
- Online growth (social media)
- Innovation and collaboration

Together, these components form a roadmap for purposeful, audience-driven communication that supports visibility, growth, and sustainability.

3. Activities

During the module, participants explored how Cultural Routes can strategically balance promotion (push) and engagement. The focus was on defining the purpose of building a digital community, whether for visibility, education, support, or shared interests and making informed decisions based on measurable objectives such as increasing members, improving engagement,

or testing new digital tools. A series of hands-on activities guided participants through the basics of marketing mix modeling:

1. Defined community purpose

Participants worked in pairs to clarify the motivation behind building a digital community for their route, such as education, awareness, or connection.

2. Goal mapping exercise

Participants mapped different types of campaigns (awareness, engagement, loyalty) to specific KPIs that could be used to measure success.

3. Channel strategy matching

Cultural Routes matched digital tools like Instagram, Facebook, newsletters, blogs to different engagement goals, identifying which platforms best supported their route objectives.

4. Micro-campaign sketching

Participants designed a simple campaign concept tied to a real or fictional event on their route. Each group outlined the campaign goal, message, chosen platforms, and success indicators.

4. Learning outcomes

By the end of this module, participants learned how to:

- Identify and apply appropriate digital tools for engaging diverse audiences
- Design basic engagement strategies tailored to their Cultural Route
- Understand how to use storytelling and interactivity to build participation

5. Application and practice

The main steps to consider in this process:

1. Identify and understand the audience

- Know their demographics, interests, and pain points.
- Tailor the content and communication style to match their preferences.

2. Choose the right platform

- Social Media: Platforms like Facebook Groups, Instagram, or LinkedIn for broader reach.
- Forums and Community Platforms dedicated to the Cultural Route's topics or interests.
- Blogs and Newsletters: For more in-depth communication and personalisation.

3. Create valuable content

- Finding content that educates, entertains, or solves problems for your audience.
- Formats to consider:
 - Videos, webinars, and live streams for direct interaction.
 - Posts, infographics, and polls for engagement.
 - Exclusive resources like guides or templates for value addition.

4. Enhance engagement (select the communication opportunities)

- Be active and responsive:
 - Start discussions by posing questions or sharing opinions.
- Encourage user-generated content:
 - Create challenges or hashtags.
 - Highlight contributions from community members.
- Host regular events:
 - Webinars, AMA (Ask Me Anything) sessions, or virtual meetups.

6. Case Studies/best practice

In general, inspiring case studies and best practices can be found in Destination Management Organisation (DMOs). A standout example of a European Destination Management Organisation excelling in digital community engagement is Visit Finland. They have effectively utilised digital tools to enhance meaningful participation and interaction with both residents and visitors.

Visit Finland: A Model for Digital Community Engagement

Visit Finland has implemented several strategies to enhance digital engagement:

- **Early public participation:** They prioritise involving the community early in the planning process, ensuring that residents have a say in tourism development.
- **Use of Digital Platforms:** By leveraging platforms like Maptionnaire, they collect community feedback and integrate it into planning and decision-making.
- **Interactive Content:** Visit Finland creates engaging content, such as interactive maps and storytelling, to connect with audiences and promote cultural routes.

These initiatives have led to increased community involvement, better-informed decision-making, and a stronger connection between the DMO and its stakeholders.

7. Templates, tools and tutorials

The following tools can be used to enhance the engagement strategy:

- **CHATGPT (OpenAI):** Content creation for blogs, social media posts, and customer support. Relevance: Tailors content to engage audiences with heritage stories or tourism promotions.

- **CANVA (AI Powered Design Tool):** Quick creation of visually appealing promotional materials. Relevance: Highlights cultural heritage content, events or tourism packages with professional designs.
- **Adobe Sensei:** Enhances creative workflows, such as photo editing and video production. Relevance: Improves marketing visuals for historical sites or cultural experiences.
- **Hootsuite Insights (Powered by Brandwatch):** AI-driven social listening to track trends and optimise campaigns. Relevance: Helps identify what resonates with tourists in the Cultural Heritage sector.
- **Grammarly (AI Writing Assistant):** Polishes content for clarity and professionalism. Relevance: Ensures high-quality communication in promotional materials.
- **Google Arts & Culture:** Provides immersive virtual tours and educational experiences. Relevance: Makes cultural heritage accessible worldwide, fostering educational outreach.

4.3 Module 3: Digital competencies for Cultural Heritage promotion

Storytelling is a useful tool for the promotion of cultural heritage because telling stories represents a universal aspect of human communication. As a matter of fact, research shows that 2/3 of human conversations consist of stories, and that stories are 20 times more likely to be remembered than facts (Dunbar, 2004). Stories are of all times. What has changed through time is only the way (and the platforms) through which stories are told: from oral transmission around the campfire to the newest forms of communication like those through digital technologies and, lately, through generative AI. But good stories remain timeless. And the way to build a powerful story also remains unchanged.

1. Introduction and Theory

The approach to storytelling that we adopt assumes that, for a story to be effective, this must touch people *emotionally*. Such a response is possible when empathy is evoked. And empathy is triggered when the story listeners can identify themselves with the story protagonist. In this way, a story does much more to people than simply informing them or making them understand something: it makes them *feel* and, in this way, it can bring about narrative transformation.

If we want people to return to a place (or recommend a visit to a place they once visited), we need to make sure that they develop such an emotional connection to it, that feeling this place and being transformed by it make possible.

2. Topics covered

Since it all starts with a good story, this training module delves into:

- The elements that make up for a good story (i.e., the character(s), the context, the conflict and the resolution)
- The many ways in which these elements can be combined, i.e., the various storytelling models that have been developed through the years
- The types of stories that originate in this way (i.e., stories that are truthful and sensible)
- The role technology can play in making (and telling) a good story
- A critical reflection of the various modern technological platforms that can be used to tell a story when it comes to authenticity, truthfulness and trust

3. Activities

The activity that was proposed at the end of the theory section required attendees to refer to the strategy that they had developed for the Marketing & Communication modules and to identify the story that they wanted this strategy to be based upon. Subsequently, attendees

were asked to design this story following the models and principles discussed in the theory section, paying particular attention to:

- The story main character(s)
- The context, consisting among others of clearly distinguishable *lieux de memoir / lieux d'imagination*
- The storyline using the 5-step model discussed during the theory
- The route stakeholders who might be involved in the definition of this story and the modalities of such an involvement
- The matching of the logic of the story with the logic of the route (Hover, 2025)
- The ideal digital platform to communicate this story taking into considerations the critical issues identified during the theory session

4. Learning outcomes

By the end of this module, the attendees were able to:

- Understand how to build a powerful story regardless of the (digital) platform by which it is told
- Get familiar with different models of story writing
- Appreciate how to include the community and the network of stakeholders around a cultural route to make their hidden stories visible and accessible
- Reflect on the role technology plays in the story telling process (as a means to a goal and not as a goal in itself)
- Base the selection of the digital platform through which to tell their story on the needs of the route stakeholders
- Match the logic of the story with the logic of the cultural route

5. Application and practice

The main points to consider when telling a story can be summarised as follows:

1. Choose the right tone of voice to tell the story
 - Make sure this tone of voice is a positive one to leave a message of hope at the end of the story regardless of the (maybe dramatic) events that might have happened in the story
2. Be credible
 - Make sure the story you tell is truthful and sensible
3. Be inclusive
 - Go beyond the obvious stories to tell, but find those that are hidden, untold, not known, the hidden gems
4. Engage your audience when telling the story

- If you want them to be part of this telling and, ultimately, to feel touched emotionally
- 5. Don't forget that technology is only a means to a goal
 - And the goal is the story

Additionally, it is important to reflect on the following issues:

1. What technology to use and why that one in particular? What are its shortcomings and benefits? How can this technology add value to the final story / experience / offering?
2. What types of stakeholders could be engaged in this story? How can they be engaged?
3. What would make engaging them successful? And why?
4. And finally, these are practical questions to consider:
 - Costs
 - Sustainability
 - Required skills and staff in charge
 - Whether upskilling / reskilling are required

6. Case Studies/best practice

As best practice, the project *Crossroads* was illustrated (Calvi and Hover, 2021). *Crossroads* is a project that was commissioned to us by the Brabant region (in the Netherlands) in 2019 to commemorate 75 years from the liberation of the country at the end of WWII.

The project consisted of telling the stories of ordinary people who found themselves at a metaphorical crossroads during the war, by having to face a dilemma that would have changed their own lives and the lives of those around them. These stories are related to various war themes (for example, occupation, resistance, mobilisation, persecution, freedom) that took place in different locations in Brabant (see Figure 1). These locations are now connected in what we could call a 'cultural route', that has been called 'Brabant Remembers', although this is by no means a recognised Cultural Route from the Council of Europe.



Figure 1: Locations in Brabant where events related to WWII took place and that are now part of the Brabant remembers route.

Source: Brabant Remembers¹

We consider this project a best practice to illustrate how we have used storytelling to promote a territory because it engaged the local community and local stakeholders in collecting and sharing the hidden and untold stories of those who found themselves at this crossroads in their lives. Their stories were collected by launching a call for hidden stories that was published in the local press and disseminated via the several local stakeholders involved and were ultimately collected through storytelling workshops at different locations (Figure 2). These stories are therefore authentic and credible.



Figure 2: Example of a storytelling workshop and of how the local community was involved in collecting the stories to tell to promote the territory.

Author: Moniek Hover

¹ [Brabant Remembers | 75 life changing war stories](#)

More than 1000 stories have been collected in this way, activating and engaging local communities and several different stakeholders. Out of them, 75 were selected, 1 for each year since the liberation of the country in 1944. These stories are told using very diverse (digital and not digital) platforms (see Figure 3).

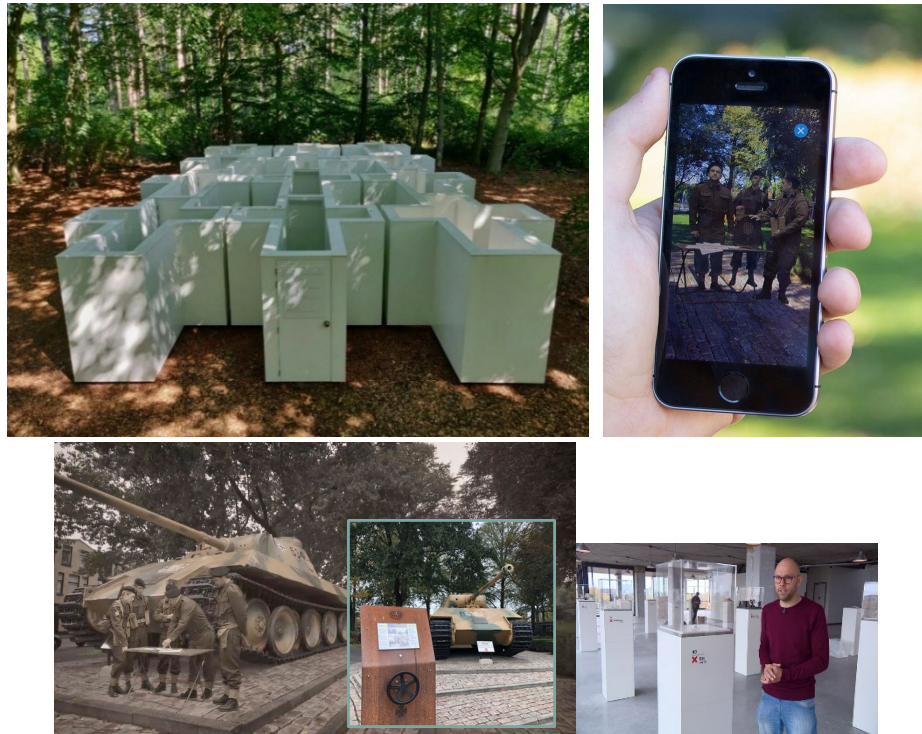


Figure 3: Examples of the platforms used to tell the Crossroads stories. Both digital and physical: i.e., the maze and the miniatures show how the project caught the attention of local artists and entrepreneurs who decided to make these stories tangible in their own way.

Author: Licia Calvi, Moniek Hover

7. Templates, tools and tutorials

To support the implementation of the storytelling concepts and principles, tools and templates can be used as discussed in the NEXT ROUTES toolkit:

- **StoryMaps (Esri):** Ideal for geolocated itineraries.
Tutorial: " Create Your First Interactive Route in 30 Minutes".
- **Tilda:** Create mini sites for exhibitions.
- **Canva:** Infographics and visual guides.
Tutorial: " Design a Visual Guide for Your Museum".
- **Actionbound:** Interactive tours and quizzes.
- **Izi.TRAVEL:** Multilingual audio guides.
Practical guide: "Record and Publish Your First Audio Guide".

- **ThingLink:** 360° Tour with hotspots.
Example: "An Immersive Experience in an Archaeological Site".
- **Genially:** Dynamic presentations.
Tutorial: "Tell the Story of an Artifact ".

4.4 Module 4: Digital competencies for gamification approaches

By cleverly using digital techniques, it is possible to engage a larger and more diverse audience for the Cultural Routes. Since Cultural Routes act as channels for intercultural dialogue and promote a better knowledge and understanding of European history (Sassatelli, 2009), involvement of the next generation is very important for the Council of Europe. Gen-Z and Gen Alpha are digital natives, and gamification might be a way to attract them.

Introduction and Theory

Digital engagement is a way to bridge the gap between museums/ sites/ monuments/ landscape and their audiences. It is a kind of edutainment giving knowledge, inspiration, fun and enjoyment, besides possibilities for co-creation, participation and interaction.

In the experience economy, the past is a commodity. It is a foreign country, and they do things differently there. Digital natives are asking for immersive, memorable experiences. Therefore, it should be aesthetic, educational, entertaining, and out of the comfort zone.

In culture 4.0, visitors blend physical with digital. These phygital experiences should be interactive, immersive, memorable and meaningful. Storytelling is at the heart and helps to connect literally and figuratively. These experiences are unique, easy to memorise, easy to tell other people, easy to connect to, and a tool for visitor management.

Gamification is yet another way to tell these stories and enhance the experience. Games are interactive, have rules, are competitive, voluntary, explorative, goal oriented, social and separated from space and time. During all steps of the customer journey, games can influence tourism experiences. Games and tourism are both temporary escapes into another world.

Topics covered

In this module, the focus is on Location-Based Games (LBG), a type of game in which gameplay evolves and progresses via a player's real-world location. LBGs must provide some mechanism to allow the player to report their location, usually with GPS. Many LBGs are run on a mobile phone, using its GPS capability.

Covered are the following topics:

- **Geocaching:** an outdoor recreational activity in which participants use a GPS receiver or mobile device and or a smartphone app to find hidden containers called "geocaches". To play, users navigate to coordinates, find the cache, sign the logbook, and leave it as they found it. It encourages outdoor adventures and exploration.

- Augmented Reality: Augmented Reality for mobile handheld devices can be understood as outdoor games making use of the player's physical location via the GPS sensor, accelerometer, compass and built-in camera to project virtual 2D and 3D objects in real time onto the mobile interface to facilitate gameplay activities. The player interacts with the virtual and physical game mechanics to overcome artificial challenges and to proceed movement in the real environment.
- The game design process: concept development, design, implementation, testing, deployment.
- Game concept: aim of the game, player motivation, first time user experience, storytelling, game mechanics, game context.
- Game design: ludic engagement, place engagement, physical engagement, social engagement, narrative engagement.
- Player and game experience: flow.

Activities

Module 4 follows on the activity of module 3 in which the participants had to create a story and storyline. They are now asked to fill this in the Location- Based Game Canvas (see Appendix 1) to turn it into a game concept. Each cultural route got a hard copy and an explanation on how to use the canvas.

The canvas consists of nine items:

- Players
- Game concept
- Game experience
- Game impact
- Market
- ROI (return on investment)
- Marketing
- Technology

It became clear that designing a game for a Cultural Route is challenging without a well-defined direction. Reaching consensus on elements such as the game's purpose and storyline can be particularly difficult. However, the story and characters developed in Module 3 offer a solid foundation, as narrative elements are essential to the overall game experience. The canvas proved to be a valuable discussion tool, it helped clarify ideas and prompted deeper reflection. As such, it can serve as an effective starting point for conversations with a game designer, guiding the development process with greater focus and alignment.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- Know to connect with next-generation travellers using gamified experiences
- Understand the way a location-based game can be designed
- Understand the importance of the LBG canvas
- Make clear to a game designer what kind of game they are aiming for and why

Application and practice

Several practical tips:

- Embrace digital transformation. Involve employees in this process and enlist external expertise if necessary.
- Work step by step. Start small, experiment, and gradually build further.
- Think about the audience. Who do you want to reach and how do you create value for them?
- Make use of existing networks. They provide support and knowledge exchange.

Case Studies/best practice

The Location-Based Game that Breda University of Applied Sciences developed for the Cultural Route Via Sancti Martini was illustrated as best practice.

The location-based game *Secrets of the Saint* can be played in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Saint Martin, the city's patron saint, is central to this experience. The Saint Martin Cultural Centre Netherlands (Utrecht) initiated the development of the Dutch segment of the Via Sancti Martini, a European Cultural Route dedicated to his legacy. To connect with a younger generation and bring history into the present, they partnered with Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUas) to develop an engaging, tech-driven solution. Immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and gaming offer powerful tools to foster understanding, curiosity, and inspiration. The core question was: *Can we make young people enthusiastic about the Via Sancti Martini by using location-based games?*

The answer took shape through the integration of open-source data from platforms such as Europeana², Google Arts & Culture, OpenStreetMap, and ArcGIS. The game built using Unity, Niantic, and the Niantic Wayfarer platform, is available as a mobile app. Players can explore various locations linked to Saint Martin around the Dom Church (St. Martin's Cathedral) in Utrecht. Using AR, they scan objects, identify them, retrieve historical context, and complete

² www.europeana.eu/en

interactive challenges rooted in the narrative. As players move through the game, they follow key events in Saint Martin's life: being drafted into the Roman army, the symbolic act of sharing his cloak, and his eventual appointment as bishop. These moments are brought to life through a mix of storytelling and immersive interaction, encouraging players to make decisions on behalf of the saint.

The app features a reward system that includes points, badges, and shareable achievements. This gamified structure not only enhances engagement but also supports community building. By sharing progress and contributing content, players help grow a collective experience. Looking ahead, the app is envisioned as a co-creation tool. In future updates, users will be able to upload photos of Saint Martin-related heritage sites, enriching the Europeana database. This participatory feature is currently under development.





Figure 4: Testing of the app in Utrecht (NL). Author: Frederike van Ouwerkerk

Templates, tools and tutorials

To support the implementation of the present gamification concepts and principles, the following tools and templates can be used:

- Niantic SDK (location-based game plugin)
- Unity (game engine)
- Niantic Wayfarer app (3D modelling)
- Python (programming language)

5. Additional best practices and case studies

The Secret of Iconoclasm

The escape route “The Secret of Iconoclasm” brings together Delft's history and the tumultuous time of the iconoclasm with adventure in the city's oldest churches. Following the clues and solving the mysteries, the player is interactively introduced to the rich history of the Old and New Church. Discovering stories of the past, admiring the architecture and in the end revealing the Secret of the Iconoclasm. The escape route follows a route inside the churches but also outside in the city center of Delft (NL). In about 75 - 90 minutes, the player has to solve a series of puzzles, crack codes, and follow cryptic clues. The goal is to find a secret treasure hidden during the iconoclasm, a tumultuous period when Protestants destroyed statues, paintings and relics in a battle against what they saw as idolatry.

Manor house Oud Amelisweerd

Manor house Oud Amelisweerd (NL), famous for its wallpaper, presents the visitor app and home application Moving Stories. Moving Stories allows visitors to experience the stories behind the unique hand-painted wallpaper. Upon entering the Manor House, visitors can scan a free QR code with their mobile phone in the entrance hall and embark on a journey of discovery.



Figure 5: Use of the app. Author: Landhouse Oud Amelisweerd

Adopt-a-Box

The Adopt -a- Box initiative, organised by the Sea & Learn Foundation, brings Saba's story vividly to life. More than 80 beautifully designed storyboards have been installed across the island, transforming electrical distribution boxes into points of discovery that showcase Saba's rich natural environment and cultural heritage. The project is strongly rooted in community participation, with local residents actively contributing to its development.

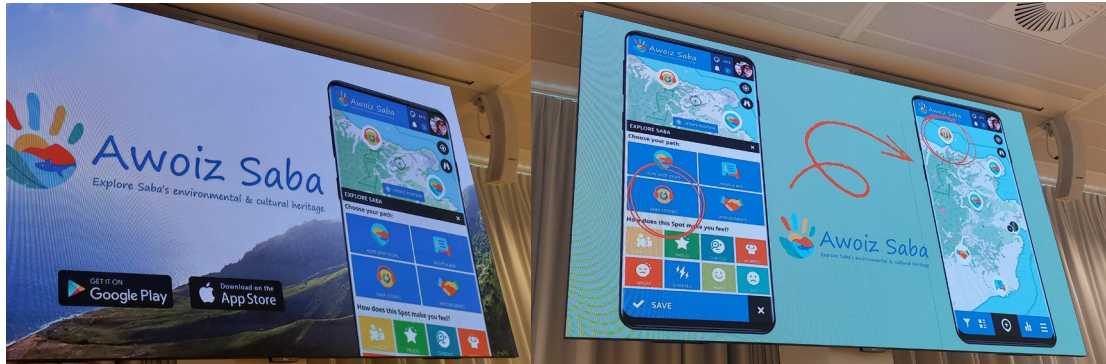


Figure 6: App Box2Box. Author: Frederike van Ouwerkerk

Box2Box

Box2Box is a companion app that creates a digital scavenger hunt along these transformed electrical boxes. Developed together with the local community, the app features multi-voice stories and interactive content that guide users across the island.

The app includes different levels and a points-based reward system, allowing users to track their progress. It also offers opportunities for user feedback and includes an emotion-based questionnaire to better understand visitor experiences. Beyond its educational and entertainment value, Box2Box also contributes to sustainable visitor management on the island.

6. Conclusion

The **NEXT ROUTES** training modules represent a forward-looking, practical response to the evolving digital and creative needs of Cultural Routes across Europe. In a time where visibility, engagement, and sustainability rely more than ever on digital competencies, Cultural Route staff must be equipped with the right tools, skills, and mindsets to adapt, innovate, and lead.

Focusing on four core areas; **marketing and promotion, heritage storytelling, engagement and participation, and gamification**, these modules offer a comprehensive yet flexible learning framework. They are grounded in real-world challenges, shaped by direct input from Cultural Route professionals, and enriched with actionable tools, templates, and best practices.

More than just training, **NEXT ROUTES is a capacity-building strategy** that empowers Cultural Routes to tell their stories more effectively, reach broader audiences, foster meaningful connections, and future-proof their operations through digital innovation.

As Cultural Routes continue to grow in scope and significance, this manual is both a guide and an invitation to experiment, to collaborate, and to lead to the digital transformation of cultural heritage in Europe.

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Appendix 1

LOCATION BASED GAME DESIGN CANVAS



LOCATION BASED GAME DESIGN CANVAS

START HERE

This Canvas is your guide in designing a LBG and helps you and your time in the iteration process.

First, enter all you know about your initial idea of the game. Use red a distinct colour of sticky notes. Then iterate throughout the design process and adapt each part with more research outcome. This canvas shall align all project members to have the same understanding of what is build or to communicate to external stakeholders.

PERSONA

PLAYERS

Who are the players? What is their demographical background? What is the motivation to play the game? Why are they playing the game? When do they play?

GAME IMPACT

What do the players learn from playing your game? Are particular skills required or does the player learn through gameplay? What kind of emotions are elicited with the game?

HIGH CONCEPT

CONCEPT

Why are you designing this game? What is the aim of the game? Why should the player play this game and what are the project/business objectives from your side to build it?

How is the game integrated in the whole tourism journey? Why is a game needed?

GAME EXPERIENCE

What kind of GX does the player have while playing? Which obstacles does he need to overcome? What are the rules of the game? What are the game mechanics and feedback loops? Is the game played alone or with others? How does the story fit with the game flow?

GAME CONTEXT

What are the game locations? Why did you choose these locations? What is the atmosphere at these locations like? Are the stories of the locations suitable for the game? How far are the locations from each other? Can the player randomly choose or does he need to follow a pre-defined path?

BUSINESS ASPECTS

TECHNOLOGY

On which platforms is your game played? Is it limited to smartphones? Is other technology (AR, beacons, QR code, NFC) used in the game? How can the game experience be extended by using transmedia channels?

MARKETING

Where will your game be marketed? Which channels do you use to sell it? What will be the revenue for the game for your end users? Are there different price models for occasional and more frequent players?

ROI

What is the return on investment for your players? What will the player gain having played the game? Are there any physical prizes? What the ROI for you as game producers and owners?

POSITIONING

What other services and products are there beside your game, which can be used to guide people around? Are there any competitors in the market with a similar product?

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