

# SouthWestFest: Edutainment through the lens of a cultural community festival, and its delivery partners

## **Introduction**

SouthWestFest is an award-winning cultural community festival that takes place each year in the city of Westminster, in Inner London. The festival works with partner organisations to deliver events that offer positive social outcomes to residents and organisations. A particular feature of the festival is that it includes opportunities for learning, these are delivered as part of its overall entertainment offering.

This chapter investigates how educational activities delivered by the festival in conjunction with its partners, may be understood as forms of edutainment. Edutainment can be defined as the enhancement of learning when facilitated through education delivered in conjunction with entertainment. This is then done with the intention to attract and excite the learner by making the learning experience more enjoyable (Aksakal, 2015). To explore this further, the chapter presents a case study of festival events and activities which have been produced in a collaboration between SouthWestFest and three of its partner organisations: Westminster Abbey, City Lions, and Pimlico Toy Library. By reflecting on this work, a range of practitioner perspectives are presented. In particular, planning and design choices are investigated in order to understand how the combination of education and entertainment can

lead to specific learning outcomes being delivered through and within the environment of a community festival.

### **Edutainment and the ‘festivalised’ servicescape**

An early example of edutainment was Walt Disney’s successful Factual Nature Pictures series, which, from 1954 onwards, were widely used as scholarly aids in schools in the US (Disney, 1954). The use of edutainment as a tool for learning both inside and outside of formal educational settings grows year on year (Jarvin, 2015). It continues to be associated with film, but now also encompasses other realms of media entertainment, such as TV, music, computer software and games. More recently, festivals and events have also provided sites of entertainment and learning, allowing opportunities for both planned and organic forms of edutainment to take place (d’Hauteserre, 2011).

Recognition of edutainment’s facility for enhancing the educational, experiential and positive social outcomes of events has led to edutainment being researched alongside other event impacts and outcomes. Science and literature festivals offer clear potential for linking entertainment and learning (Jensen & Buckley, 2012; Rossetti & Quinn, 2019), whilst the role and outcomes of edutainment for other types of festivals such as food festivals (Carvalho et al., 2021), arts festivals (Viljoen et al., 2018), film festivals (Herrschnner, 2015) and music festivals (Sisson & Alcorn, 2022) has also been investigated. Although some scholars have begun to note edutainment as a potentially important outcome of local cultural events (Kim, 2017), scant research has been undertaken to date regarding forms and outcomes of edutainment that are directly related to community festivals and to the importance of both festival’s setting.

The popularisation of festivals across all sectors and artistic genres is reflective of the general rise in consumer demand, particularly amongst the young, for ephemeral experiences

rather than for products, a trend that has given rise to the ‘experience economy’. Gilmore and Pine (1999) suggested that services that embody an overlap of the four realms of experience design –entertainment, education, aesthetics and escapism – provide opportunities for both interactive and passive forms of participation. Intentional curation of the festival experience can also be useful for the marketing of event experiences, with the notion that event programmes which become ‘festivalised’ offer a more exciting incentive for audiences (Négrier, 2015).

Festivals and events can be considered as a service environment or servicescape (Bitner, 2000), deliberately designed to deliver tangible effects on consumer behaviour, favourable to the festival organiser’s desired outcomes. Moreover, numerous studies (Bruwer, 2012; Lee et al., 2008; Yoon et al., 2010) now draw on the concept of the festivalscape, identifying both the tangible and intangible cues specific to a festival environment which lead to the intentional shaping of the festival consumer experience to evoke a positive emotional response and enhance overall visitor satisfaction. Although these studies generally refer to the curation of the festivalscape as being helpful to the perceived service quality and economic value of the festival, Chou et al. (2018) and Chen et al. (2019) amongst others, have argued that the cues which shape the consumer’s experience of the festival environment can also support wider positive outcomes. Indeed, community festivals have long been heralded for the wide range of intangible and tangible benefits they offer to their host communities and stakeholders, including showcasing talent, promoting culture and heritage, providing informal learning experiences (Paris, 2002). Developing both social and cultural capital for attendees, in addition to developing social sustainability through improving wellbeing (Stevenson, 2020; Brownnett & Evans, 2019). As well as supporting a wider sense of belonging, community cohesion and placemaking (Andrews & Leopold, 2013).

Community festivals have also been identified as sites conducive to forms of public pedagogy, wherein autonomous community-led learning takes place through participation in a festival setting in a public space (Li et al., 2017). The forms of learning that take place within these festival sites might be considered ‘non-formal learning’, which Rogers (2014 p.12) defines as learning that takes place through a planned educational activity, outside of the formal educational setting. Or alternatively, ‘informal learning’, defined by Mcgiveness (2002, p.1) in which people accumulate understanding, skills, and knowledge from their everyday life. Learning which takes place at festivals and events can also be considered experiential learning, where learning is undertaken through embodied experience and strengthened through memory making (Kolb, 2015). As such, it is interesting to further consider how community festivals and their partners approach the design and curation of the festival experience and entertainment to support or enhance non-formal or informal learning opportunities, as forms of edutainment.

## **Methods**

This chapter sets out to consider how the specific cues, environment and setting of the SouthWestFest festivalscape are utilised by the festival and its partners concerning the planning and design of learning and engagement activities which can take place in conjunction with entertainment. It does this by offering an interpretive study of practitioner perspectives on approaches to learning design and production of educational activities delivered for and in collaboration with SouthWestFest festival, identifying outcomes of learning as edutainment.

The chapter uses a qualitative research methodology to support the investigation of the choices, attitudes and behaviours of those working within leisure settings such as community festivals (Veal, 2017). The method of a case study was chosen to offer a holistic investigation

in order to consider the complexities of the relationships between the festival and its partners, within the wider context of real-life events in the community festival setting (Leavy, 2014). Non-probability sampling methods were used in support of the small exploratory research for this chapter. Interviews were conducted with SouthWestFest alongside three of the festival's partner organisations which were selected as a purposive sample to provide a range of experience (in years) of working with the festival, as well as offering a variety of services and activities designed for different subsets of audiences (family, youth, children) and learning outcomes. This method was chosen to support the investigation of a range of experiences and offer specific insights from different practitioners' expertise.

Research for the case study presented, includes primary data from four interviews which were held with a member of staff from the festival itself, and a member of staff from each of the partner organisations, this was supported by secondary research from websites, organisational reports, and other online sources. Ethics approval for all data collected was sought and approved. Semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were chosen to let the interviewee lead the discussion and reduce the opportunity for bias or coercion (Grindsted, 2005). Interviews were then coded and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2022), to form the basis of the case study and key emerging themes highlighted in the discussion presented. It is also important to note the author's close position concerning the research and discussion within the chapter. The author of this chapter was previously the Festival Director of SouthWestFest from 2015 - 2021 and therefore draws on their prior knowledge of festival activities and partnerships.

### **Case Study – Learning through Entertainment at SouthWestFest**

SouthWestFest is a charity-led cultural community festival which has been held annually for the last 18 years. It takes place each July delivering around 150 free or low-cost events and

activities, in addition, in recent years, it has also delivered a series of online events. The festival is supported by more than 70 partner organisations and groups who contribute events, venues, resources, staff, and volunteers to aid the festival programme. Each year the festival is launched with the outdoor Festival Day, which attracts an audience of thousands and has become a hallmark event for the community. Following this, a three-week themed festival programme is delivered across south Westminster. The SouthWestFest festival programme is made up of a curated programme which is driven and produced by the festival and collaborating partners. Running alongside an open access programme which promotes events that are independently produced by local organisations and groups. The festival organisers also pick a theme, to tie together both sides of the programme (SouthWestFest, 2022).

For the festival organisers, learning is an integral part of the festival experience, as they explain, “all our festival activities include learning as a natural part of the experience which can be derived from that event. For example, audiences attending Festival Day might learn about a new style of music, or cultural dance. Alternatively, the performers participating will often be part of a performing school, so learning takes place as part of their own self development.” However, the organisers also note that it’s not just about what's on the stage, as they deliver a range of experiences through both indoor and outdoor events, which are not just entertaining, or cultural experiences, but also embedded into other parts of people's lives such as their wellbeing, education and careers. The organisers went on to explain “the festival only happens once a year, so can often provide opportunities for unique educational moments, such as learning how to rock climb at one of our outdoor events, or writing poetry as part of a Heritage Trail.”

Given that many of SouthWestFest’s partner organisations serve cultural, arts, heritage, health and education sectors, a considerable part of the activities that take place within the

festival setting are planned and led by learning professionals; the aim is that the learning outcomes derived from taking part in the festival link back to the educational output of the partner organisation. This aim, in turn, connects to one of the festival's wider charitable objectives: namely, to improve the lives and well-being of south Westminster residents by boosting engagement and longer-term interaction with local services (SouthWestFest, 2020).

A good example of one of SouthWestFest's longest running partnerships, is their work with Pimlico Toy Library, a charity that supports families by offering play sessions, which include toys, play, art and crafts, plus special activities such as day trips, and school holidays, as well as toy loans from a library of 1500 multicultural and age-appropriate toys (Pimlico Toy Library, 2014). Pimlico Toy Library has taken part in SouthWestFest since its first edition in 2004, with activities including festival parade floats, costume-making workshops, giant games, safe play areas and arts and crafts. The festival organisers note, "working with Pimlico Toy Library, enables us to design and deliver relevant educational activities for babies, toddlers, young children and their families which are age appropriate, and promote stimulating and engaging interactions within the festival setting." To support Pimlico Toy Libraries staff, draw on their extensive knowledge of early years learning and development theory and best practice. Librarians explain "we look to develop fine and gross motor skills and mental and physical skills. We try to take a creative, innovative and holistic approach."

The Librarians also highlighted the importance of factoring in all sorts of opportunities for entertainment into their activities design, "the barriers to learning are multi-fold. You've to inspire, motivate and encourage learning. It has to be fun, and entertainment in the widest sense has a huge part to play. So, we're always looking for new experiences to make that point and taking part in SouthWestFest has factored into that". When considering their interaction with the festival environment, and how it might change or shape learning and

engagement activities they responded, “the whole atmosphere and environment of the festival is encouraging and uplifting. All the motivation of an upbeat environment enables us to show the children and families we work with that learning is fun, and how important learning is to change things. To prove that children and adults can learn if the environment is right.”

The festival themes also help to shape the activities, for example, children and parents will learn about the environment, because they have taken part in a recycled materials costume-making workshop for a sustainability-themed parade. This leads to new and different kinds of learning taking place as the Librarians explain, “the festival has enabled us to do something a little bit different. It shows parents what their children are capable of, and they are amazed at what they as a family have achieved.” The librarians also noted that through responding to the festival theme, the activities take on an element of the festival’s entertainment offer, and learning becomes more experiential and relevant, going beyond the regular early years learning.

Each of the festival's partners supports the festival in the creations of unique entertainment experiences which attract different demographics of local audiences. In turn the partners often want to get involved in the festival, to expand their audiences living in the south Westminster locality. It was through looking to conduct local community outreach that the family learning team from Westminster Abbey first connected with SouthWestFest in 2017.

Westminster Abbey is one of the Church of England’s most iconic structures and is the location for numerous high-profile national services, in addition to it offers of regular daily services and being an extremely important historic, cultural heritage site and popular visitor attraction, an important part of its work is to provide opportunities for learning and engagement in the areas of history, religious education and culture (Westminster Abbey, n.d).

One of the most successful collaborations has been Westminster Abbey's contribution to outdoor workshops delivered at SouthWestFests Festival Day, as the festival organisers note, "we need a wide range of content which is appealing to our audiences, and our partners help us with this by leading on activities designed for the workshop zone. Westminster Abbey always designs engaging and intergenerational activities, in which learning takes place organically. It's interesting to see what will draw people in. Some will stop by for a few moments, and others will stay for over an hour trying out what is on offer"

The Festival Day event offers a unique inviting atmosphere for participant engagement, as highlighted by Westminster Abbey's family learning team "it is a marketplace of opportunities, and people want to try a little bit of everything. You get a lot of tweens to teens who are exploring by themselves because they're in a safe space, on their territory, so they feel like they have complete ownership of their own experience. It's joyful when you have music and an entertaining atmosphere. People are learning, but don't think they are learning because what they are having is a great time, and they are having a great time because learning is fun."

This atmosphere is utilised by the Westminster Abbey team, when planning educational activities to deliver with the festival. Mirroring in-house activities, they design activities that are informed by fun, playfulness, song, storytelling and entertainment which encourage participants to learn together. However, they adapt the design of activities to ensure they can happen in a shorter time frame to reflect the transient nature of the festival. Activities delivered for the outdoor Festival Day workshops have ranged from Arch building competitions, mirroring the architecture of the Abbey, to dressing up as memorial statues and making scenes for group and family photography portraits, "these activities create a fun togetherness, help people make happy memories together and at the same time we can have a

conversation that leads to learning something about Westminster Abbey, which potentially encourages them to visit us or they might take away leaflets to think or further reflect on.”

The Westminster Abbey team went on to reflect upon how taking part in the SouthWestFest Festival Day had informed the family learning team’s in-house approach to learning and events design; “we have learnt a lot from the festival on how to welcome people from the area, subconsciously it’s informed our family days, which like the festival day, have a marketplace of activity, combined with structured moments of entertainment. We try to recreate the atmosphere that we would have at the festival. It’s about creating that experience and memories.” The team also noted that collaborating with and taking part in SouthWestFest, supported them in their aim to welcome more local people through the doors of Westminster Abbey, as well as furthering people’s learning and understanding of the Abbey’s history and existence. Whereas the for the festival organisers, bringing on board prestigious partners such as Westminster Abbey, benefits the festival in numerous ways, as they explain “the partnership ha helped us develop our cultural and heritage offer and the rich history of Westminster Abbey, inspires people’s imaginations when taking part our festival events.”

Like many festivals in 2020 SouthWestFest was forced to flip its delivery to an online digital festival with major changes in planned provision, as the Covid-19 global pandemic caused local and national lockdown measures across the UK. Previous to these changes, SouthWestFest had been developing a new partnership with City Lions, a youth engagement programme for 13 to 16-year-olds organised by Westminster City Council.

City Lions were already working in Westminster delivering a range of programmes that support young people in their personal development by breaking down the barriers to

accessing cultural, and creative sectors, and by acting as a bridge, to encourage young people to explore new interests and opportunities (City Lions, 2022).

Pivoting to online delivery, SouthWestFest delivered its first digital festival and at the same time City Lions turned its Creative Industries Week into a youth-based digital festival. Both events ran across the same timeframe and the organisations came together to produce collaborative events, jointly programmed and promoted across both festivals. City Lions team reflected on this time, “festivalising the online content made it more attractive, fun and entertaining, working as a bit of a marketing hook. We also had to change our usual programme to include things that were more performative and entertaining, which we found was needed as people adjusted to activities online.” In addition, festival organisers highlighted how the collaboration enabled them to develop a better offer for youth orientated events, “when lockdown took place, we had to think about how we could reinvent the festival’s offer to young people in the area. We hadn't produced online events for young people before and working with City Lions helped us to find new ways to interact with that audience.”

As with the other festival partners, the City Lions team recognise that entertainment is a motivational factor in getting young people involved in the programmes they provide. As they pointed out, “engaging with culture is important because it offers development and learning by stealth. The young people don’t even realise they are learning in the process of being together and having fun.” Working together on shared festival events enabled both organisations to mix professional learning development with entertainment, culture and performance. For example, the two organisations co-produced an online stand-up comedy workshop including a stand-up comedy show. The City Lions team reflected “there has to be something that gets the young people there in the first place. It helps us engage those that are

hardest to reach. Attending the performances, the young people might see something of themselves in the people who are performing, and then by taking part realise that actually, this might be for them too”. Further to the online comedy workshop, both organisations collaborated on a creative industries event. The festival organisers added, “it was a great opportunity to work with and educate younger teens on new potential career opportunities. They may have heard of the festival but not ever considered how it was run. Taking part in the workshop inspired them to consider running their own events within the community.” Finally, both the festival organisers and City Lions team also recognised other benefits of the collaboration, as shared budgets enabled both organisations to offer more to their respective audiences, and cross-promotion of joint events created opportunities to widen audiences.

## **Discussion**

Across the case study, similar themes arose within the festival and its partners responses to planning and design for learning when it takes place outside of their normal spaces and is brought into the festival environment. The majority of learning was shaped toward informal learning outcomes (McGivney, 2002), as the aim for learning within these situations was broad. When thinking about how entertainment factored into learning design, what often came into focus was the terms fun and play, emphasising the emotional and physical experiential reactions to the entertainment, rather than the form of entertainment itself being the motivator for the learning experience. Memory making has long been understood to be an important factor in the success of experiential learning methods (Kolb, 2015), and the partners highlighted this, as they identified the need to create new experiences which supported memory making and which encouraged interactions between individuals learning together.

Like many festivals, SouthWestFest offers a unique one-off experience which takes place outside of everyday activities and which are conducive to public forms of pedagogy (Li et al.,

2017). SouthWestFest and its partner organisations' design of learning activities were often reshaped, to better fit the 'one-off' transient nature of the festival space and short-term interactions with festival participants. SouthWestFest's outdoor Festival Day was referred to as a marketplace of opportunities, and consequently, activities needed to be more impactful, to catch people's attention and draw participation. The approaches to learning activities designed for the festival all included elements which echoed Gilmore and Pine's (1999) idea of the 'sweet spot' of experience design. Although this concept was not directly referred to, it is interesting to note the partners' inherent understanding of how expectations of festival participants are shaped within the wider experience economy.

The provision of entertainment and alongside learning of activities was beneficial both SouthWestFest and its partners in widening engagement. The special 'one-off' nature of unexpected or unusual entertainment and festival events, acted as a 'hook' to draw in new audiences as participants in informal learning activities. Festivalisation of cultural programmes and activities has long been used as a marketing strategy for audience development (Négrier, 2015). Although not a new idea, the case study still highlighted the added value that the festivalisation of community events and activities offer, supporting organisations in ensuring sustainable growth in access to their services by residents.

Edutainment at SouthWestFest can be seen to be taking place through a multitude of direct entertainment formats both predesigned and organic (d'Hauterres, 2011). These might include on the stage and through workshops, play, arts and crafts as well as through the festival participants' immersion within the special celebratory environment that a community festival provides. In the case of the festival and its partners, this offers them the freedom to work differently. The combination of the direct entertainment forms, the entertaining atmosphere, and the experience of both emotional (fun) and physical (play) offer 'stand out'

opportunities for the festival and its partners to engage and increase learning. As highlighted in the case study, this then produces learning which happens by stealth, as people do not realise they are learning, because they are less aware of the learning whilst having fun. These experiences become a useful tool to draw in those who might shy away from other educational experiences, or think that learning is not for them, benefiting the festival participants, as well as the festival and its partners.

## **Conclusions**

In concept, edutainment is taking place at SouthWestFest, as entertainment and the environment is utilised in the design and delivery of learning activities. However, interestingly, the partner organisations interviewed said they had never previously used the word 'edutainment' within their conveying of learning design and strategy to stakeholders or in outward-facing communications to public audiences. This then begs the question, how can further understanding these processes as edutainment be valuable to the festival, its partners and stakeholders in the future?

There is value in the ability to easily replicate the success factors that derive from edutainment delivered in a community festival atmosphere, into other public spaces and activities as positive learning experiences. In addition, many community festivals and their partners are charity based and rely on external public funding which often requires stringent measuring of opportunities, outputs and outcomes. Here, further exploration of the use of the concept of edutainment, to support clearer communication of the importance of entertainment as part of learning processes could support festivals and their partners in better evaluation of their objectives and justification of practices and outcomes.

This chapter provides just a small sample of perspectives on how entertainment and education can combine as edutainment to support positive outcomes in a community festival

context. Further research into edutainment design in connection to learning approaches and frameworks to support the analysis of its outcomes, could be very useful to support the ongoing sustainability of community festivals and their collaborating sectors. In addition, through the ongoing interaction between researchers, festivals, their partners and practitioners, the concept and terminology of edutainment may be better understood and used for the benefit of all involved.

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