

The Life-cycle of a Story Mat

However well-made and beautiful, a story mat is no good unless it fulfils the promise that brought it into being. It must be right for the place, the people and the purpose for which it was created. With my background in science and in teaching, my storyteller friend and collaborator (Marion Leeper), my experience in researching, designing and creating story mats, and my well-honed sewing skills, I am well-qualified to carry through all stages of the process.

Typically a story mat takes around three months from inception to delivery.

Each story mat is an individual, with a unique 'life-cycle', but here I try to give a 'flavour' for each stage of the process.

Inception:

Most initial contacts are made by phone and email, but I am always keen to make a visit, to see where the mat is to be used, the resources it is to reflect, and especially to meet the people involved, and find out what want from the mat. As I come to understand the context and the purpose of the story mat, and in discussion with the stakeholders, ideas for the story mat begin to emerge.

Planning:

After my initial visit, I am in a position to suggest what could be done for a given budget. Assuming this is broadly acceptable, I then submit a draft plan for the mat to stakeholders for their consideration. Design of the mat is a collaborative process, much of which involves refining and adding more detail to this draft plan following feedback from stakeholders. I really enjoy researching details for the mat, but to make good use of my time, I do need someone with relevant expertise to advise me and point me in the right direction. If the mat is to have bespoke pockets for models or handling samples, these need to be in the plan, with relevant dimensions. As the plan develops and solidifies, it becomes the 'blueprint' from which I construct the mat.

Making:

In reality, the planning and construction stages often overlap, so I start by making the more well-defined features while other parts of the design remain fluid. I delay the assembling of the mat as long as possible, to keep options open. My story mats are build to last, so I am careful to choose materials, threads and construction methods which will be durable. I like to keep stakeholders updated on progress, often with photos and commentaries by email or Facebook. Optionally, I can produce a more formal interim report.

Users' Notes / Photography:

Each mat comes with a laminated label photograph identifying features on the mat, with corresponding *Users' Notes*, of which there is one-page quick-reference version (also laminated), and a more detailed version with research references for more leisurely study. These come in digital as well as printed form.

Also supplied, a set of about thirty professional photographs of the mat, licensed for educational / promotional use, which can, for example, be used to promote events involving the mat on websites, blogs, and fliers.

Optionally, I can also supply a short animated movie showing the whole mat showing flaps opening and closing, and a super-high resolution photograph of the whole mat suitable for posters.

Delivery:

I like to deliver the mat in person, and at the same time hold a brief training session for staff and volunteers in using the mat and the associated *Users' Notes*.

Using:

This is really up to you, but I am always eager to hear about my mats, so please keep me 'in the loop'. I have discovered that use of a story mat often evolves in quite unexpected directions, and with this in mind, I try to design the mat to be open to different interpretations to fit different occasions and storytellers; please tell me of your experiences.

I would also like to recommend my friend and collaborator, storyteller Marion Leeper, who will be happy to tell stories using your mat and/or train your staff and volunteers to do so.