

“It’s important *to believe in success*”

Riksteatern in Sweden has for many years been running and contributing to school/culture projects both nationally and internationally. In the CreatLearn project, Riksteatern’s task has been that of capturing, highlighting and spreading experience. In October, 2013 all the CreatLearn partners gathered for a final conference in Guldborgsund. That provided an opportunity where together they could reflect upon and evaluate the project. Besides the Logbook entries on the CreatLearn-homepage partners continuously have been reporting on project progress, they were able to share and listen to experience gained from the facets of the work that they each had participated in. But they also looked at the CreatLearn concept as a whole and the collaboration it had involved – between teachers and students, as well as between schools and culture experts, and of course the cooperation between the various partners in the four different countries.

This was an opportunity of looking backwards on the journey of the project, but naturally also of looking ahead towards future projects and new collaborative ventures.

At the final conference delegates from all the countries participated in a workshop led by Riksteatern for the purpose of discussion, reflection and evaluation. Teachers, principals, project leaders and representatives of the school leaderships were present.

The issues discussed during the workshop included the question as to whether the teachers felt that CreatLearn had changed their teaching style. Were they able to discern anything they themselves had learned and did they have any concrete examples of what the students had learned? What had the

exchange with teachers from other countries contributed? Had the project leaders and principals learned anything that had changed their style of leadership? And, in retrospect, did they consider CreatLearn to be a good way of exploring Civil Courage?

More cooperation in the future

When it was time for the teachers to pick out something in their way of teaching that had changed or developed in and through the CreatLearn project, the majority of them answered:

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cooperation. One teacher said that previously he had mostly been working on his own but that in the course of the project he had begun to work in pairs with other teachers. He wanted that to continue. Another teacher shared how she too had been working alone in her class, prior to CreatLearn, but that since then she is often cooperating not only with other teachers, but with other classes.

Working together as a group of colleagues and across the different classes was a new experience for several of them. And many expressed that they would like to make plans for more such collaborations in the future, as they could see how it would facilitate new possibilities.

The teachers could also see how cooperation with the students had changed their way of teaching. A number of them now preferred to let the students be more involved in the learning process.

Insights and knowledge about new methods are things that have developed them – in a number of ways, say the teachers. And, the teachers in Denmark say that Forum Theatre, amongst other things, now has its given place in their regular curriculum.

New methods and ways of thinking

At the same rate as the students have been learning new methods introduced by the culture experts, the teachers have been doing the same. For several of them the methods have been totally new. Others were already acquainted with the methods but their knowledge and understanding of them has been strengthened.

In addition, the international collaboration has opened their eyes to more new methods than those they themselves used during the project. Some of the teachers say that the insight into other partners' methods has inspired an interest in them to test these in their own classes in the future.

When it comes to the international collaboration, the visits to one another's schools came up for discussion. Seeing the approaches to teaching in other countries has been interesting, since they differ in several ways. The school systems are both structured differently and organised differently. This has opened up for new thought processes concerning their own work, in both principals and teachers.

Have the students learned anything?

The project as a whole is viewed by the teachers as something very positive. It has been interesting...fun...exciting.

But, can they point to specific areas where they see that their pupils have learned something? Can they specify how it has developed the students and produced results? Some find this difficult. Perhaps it is too early to see any effect yet, somebody said. Maybe it will become apparent in the distant future?

Some points were made by the teachers, however. Amongst other things, they mention that the students have learned to cooperate in larger groups, that they have realised the importance of taking corporate responsibility for the group and of meeting deadlines.

The students' self-esteem has improved. They have become

more motivated, not only in working on the project, but it has been evident in other subjects as well.

The students' creative abilities have developed.

The students have learned the art of reflection and to think in new ways.

At some of the schools, the consensus is that general results have improved thanks to the way the project has raised their level of motivation and commitment.

Approaching the theme 'Civil Courage'

Something important that the students have learned, as observed by the teachers, is that they have a right to their own opinion. That it is not about always following the group, but rather choosing the path you yourself consider to be the right one. And, to have the courage to do that.

Civil Courage.

Making use of the project in approaching this subject proved to be very successful. One teacher shared about how she had tried to tackle this subject before, more from a theoretical aspect. That had not produced any particular effect among the students, at least not as far as she could make out. But, this way of working – not only approaching the subject theoretically but in concrete, practical ways – had produced results. All agree on that.

During the project, the students have not merely been told: This is civil courage. Instead they have had to reflect over it themselves and ask themselves the question: What is civil courage for me?

They have also been challenged in the area of civil courage. They have had the opportunity of training themselves in daring to express their own opinion – taking a stand and having the courage to stick to it in spite of external pressure.

IMPORTANT PROGRESS FACTORS:

On the basis of their own experiences, the delegates together picked out some important progress factors for a successful project. They compiled the following list of their best tips and pieces of advice. It is meant to serve as a guide for anyone who is about to embark on a similar project.

THOROUGH PREPARATION. Good planning at the commencement of the project lightens the load in the long run. And this applies to all levels: among students, teachers and school leadership.

TIME: BEFORE, DURING, AFTER. Setting aside time for the project is essential: time for careful preparation, allocated teaching time for the execution of tasks and time for evaluation and reflection.

INVOLVE TEACHERS. It is a good idea to assemble a group of teachers that can drive the project forward. Make sure all members of this group are motivated and have a desire to work on the project. Also ensure that some in the group, preferably all, can see the entire project through.

INVOLVE THE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP. Only with support from the principal and school leadership is it possible for you to allocate the time and resources necessary for the project.

INVOLVE STUDENTS. Make sure the students get involved in the project from the start. Get them engaged in the planning and let them be the main resource in the creative work. Listen to their ideas – what they want to do and what desires they have. If the students have their own say in the proceedings they are more likely to be motivated. And, motivated students are going to produce much better results.

FIND PARTNERS TO COLLABORATE WITH. Bring in professional culture experts to support the work and share their knowledge. Choose partners who are really willing and prepared to commit.

COOPERATE. Make sure to cooperate throughout the project. It's a good idea for all partners to meet prior to commencement for the purpose of agreeing on the shape of the project. Continue having regular follow-up meetings. It is important in a collaborative venture that all partners are well aware of their own particular responsibility.

WRITE DOWN GUIDELINES. Compile a project plan and a time plan so that all participants have common goals and are all aware of what those goals are. Describe in the plan what is going to happen and in what order. In forming the plan, include long-term goals that point to something beyond the duration of the project. Ask the question: What do we wish to achieve with the project and where do we want it to lead in the long term? Also make sure you integrate the project into the regular curriculum.

DO YOU HAVE EVERYTHING YOU NEED? Ensure you have the financial resources before commencing the project. What resources do you need?

CHOOSE THE RIGHT THEME. If the project is going to have an overriding theme, then choose something meaningful! Something that can appeal to all taking part and which you can keep relating back to in the daily work.

HAVE A KICK-OFF. Before you get started on the project, have a kick-off. It is good to have one that shakes things up a bit and that touches the participants on a personal level.

DOCUMENT THE PROJECT. You can do this by assembling material, filming or photographing the process. But participating in a workshop and documenting it at the same time is not always easy. One solution can be to bring in an extra person who can take responsibility for that part.

REFLECT AND EVALUATE. Do this regularly and not only at the end of the project. Let reflection be a natural part of the process. Often, take a step back and look at how far you have come and what remains to be done to reach your goals. Do not limit the process of reflection and evaluation to the teacher group – do this together with students and culture experts.

EXHIBIT YOUR PROJECT. Do something that feels as though it's for real by showing your work publicly. You may put on a performance, an exhibition or a vernissage. Displaying the work is a way of putting a stamp of significance on it. It signals to the students that what you have been doing together is worth showing off to others.

BELIEVE IN SUCCESS! This is probably more important than anything.

AHA AND WOW MOMENTS:

The workshop concluded with participants sharing about a moment during the project when they had felt: aha! or wow!

It might have been an episode, a revelation or something that someone had said.

Everyone shared about their own special moment and around the room were heard several exclamations of aha and wow, as they hooked into each others' stories and said that they had experienced something similar. It brought back memories and some of the anecdotes caused rippling laughter around the room.

Many teachers expressed having had wow-moments when they had seen some particular improvement in the students. Stories were told about students that had been standing with their arms folded, refusing to participate. One student had said during the first workshop: "This is too much for me."

That student had no confidence whatsoever that he would be capable of carrying out what the workshop required. After one year's work he had a very different attitude. Now, the same student was standing there with a glass of sparkling water in his hand, ready to say 'cheers' as he welcomed other students to the vernissage where his own work was going to be exhibited. There he stood proudly telling the others that this was what he had been involved in.

There were also stories about students who had not had the courage to say anything at the beginning of the project – those who had been anonymous and shy but who had grown and gained enough self-confidence to even agree standing on a stage by the end of the project. These students, who initially had been resistant to taking part in a workshop but who were

now on stage acting, dancing and singing before an audience time and time again.

Cooperation and Civil Courage

A number of them had had a strong wow experience when they had seen how well the students were cooperating with each other, and how they had developed a sense of respect for teamwork. When they saw that they were not only taking responsibility for themselves by doing the tasks they themselves had taken on, but that they also had a sense of responsibility for what the group was to accomplish together.

The cooperative spirit that had prevailed between students and teachers was also mentioned here. That they could feel afterwards: Wow, we did it together!

Several teachers said that the civil courage theme had rubbed off on the students. They were now showing greater courage when it comes to personally standing up for something. They take responsibility – for themselves and for their classmates. Not only in class, but also during the breaks.

Those from Kalmar gave an account of the strong experience that the Forum Theatre had provided, which had challenged the students' civil courage. One teacher admitted that he himself had been nervous about that day. He knew beforehand what the idea of it was, but the question was whether any student would dare to stand up and make a protest? And, when some of the students did just that, he felt wow. Partly because the students had the courage but also because he had been a little surprised when he saw which ones had done it. The other teachers agreed. Several of the students exhibited a civil courage that surprised everyone.

"It really was a wow-moment", said one of the teachers.

One teacher said that she had felt both aha and wow the day the students were dividing themselves into smaller groups for the work in various workshops. The students were allowed to choose themselves which group to join, and all too often that has resulted in the students choosing the same group as their best mate. But now it was different. Instead they chose according to what they were really interested in, and furthermore they stuck to their choice.

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Nothing turning into something

For most of them the wow experience had had to do with seeing an end result – the works of art that had been created, films, music, dance, songs, photographs, acting on stage and texts that had been written.

“It was a wow to see that nothing can turn into something”, said one teacher from Klaipeda after following the work of putting together Sandbox Citizens.

Another teacher then talked about the chaos they had experienced before the first performance, and how she had thought that they would never get it together. But it worked. The audience applauded. They even received a standing ovation.

The happiness and pride felt by students, teachers and culture experts alike was tremendous.

What a wow moment!

A number of the teachers emphasised how fantastic it had been to see the students’ creative talents. The project certainly proved



One of the methods used in the workshop was “The hot seat”, similar to “Fruit Salad” which is described in the chapter, “Teaching toolkits”. A statement is made to the group and those who agree with the statement mark this by getting up and swapping chairs.

In this exercise the participants also have the opportunity of commenting on and arguing for the stand they have taken. Why did they stand up in agreement? Why did they not?

that everyone can be creative, regardless of any previous background. And this does not only apply to the students but to the teachers as well. Those teachers who before the project had said that they were not creative also had it proven to them that this was not the case. They too had it in them to be creative.

For the teachers, seeing these sides in the students was really awesome. Totally unimagined talents and abilities, which the teachers had not been aware of or seen any sign of before, suddenly emerged. They might have been sitting in the audience, for example, hearing students sing – those students they had no idea could sing, or dance, or act on stage. When it came to producing films, it appeared that several students had knowledge

in that area too. To meet the students like this, in new roles and situations was exciting. Some

expressed that this also contributed to a deepening of the relationships between students and teachers.

... AND IN CONCLUSION



Summarising the experiences of a large EU-funded project with five partners in four countries has been a challenge, not least because the only common denominator has been: school interacting with culture under the banner of civil courage. Several times during the process, we have asked ourselves whether there were any visible commonalities in the lessons that have come out of the various sub-projects. Are we able to see the things that matter, not only in the interaction between school and culture but also in the events that occur in very diverse locations under very diverse conditions? At the closing CreatLearn conference it became apparent that this had been so. That something new and stimulating happens when we use creative learning methods. Regardless of culture genre all the parties felt they had reached a deeper understanding of the concept of civil courage, and that the students in different ways, within and without the framework of the project, were demonstrating increased civil courage in their actions.

CreatLearn, where students and teachers along with cultural experts have chosen to make an impact on the community, has also led to their own school as a location and centre of activity receiving much positive attention in the media and among the general public – something that schools usually do not have too much of. Realising that what you are doing during school time is contributing and making a difference in “real life” is, according to teaching research, of great importance and this is what students have experienced in CreatLearn.

Daring to invite external experts into school activities has been absolutely crucial for the success of the project and herein many teachers have testified to having learnt many new methodologies themselves and to having developed a new contact network that they can make use of again. And here they particularly point out that, despite their newly acquired knowledge, it is vital to continue to obtain knowledge from the outside to increase the motivation of their students.

The single most tangible factor for success or possible failure in CreatLearn has been TIME. All the projects have shown that a long-term, all-embracing perspective and sufficient time for planning, implementation and follow-up are quintessential for the project not to become a one-hit-wonder in the life of the school. In this context, the school principals and leaders play an important role as facilitators and legitimators and are the keys to general changes based on specific projects.

It can be said concerning our common theme, Civil Courage, that it should be viewed as “the touchstone” of the project. Just as in an artistic process, the students and teachers have “a higher purpose” than simply working with culture in schools. They have explored and been engaged in something that has been compelling and stirring on a more personal level. The stories from teachers about students who have stepped forward and revealed new facets of themselves show quite clearly what trust in the processes and students’ influence can achieve. Here, art and culture have an important role to play in the formation of creative meeting arenas and methodologies.

From Riksteatern’s perspective, we can state that we are in constant need of this type of experimental project, in parallel with research, such as for example the one engaged in by Birgitta E. Gustafsson (Tutor and Researcher at Linnaeus University, SE) in CreatLearn. And then, we also need to constantly testify about and reflect on the efforts we are making - thus allowing these to contribute to development and become part of a societal learning process that reaches further than to those individuals who have taken part.

Katarina Ellborg
Partner Project Leader, Riksteatern

