CTF in Action – Caravan Circus by Marc Verhille

The Caravan Circus project is the “Implementation in four countries of training for trainers in social circus, based on the results of *Circus Trans Formation*, *a Guidebook for social circus trainers*“. The teaching is divided in five sub-units, called Teaching Learning Unit (TLU), as shown in the drawing.



The different organizations had to send two members for this four weeks training. The represented organizations are: *Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles* (Belgium), *Sorin Sirkus* (Finland), *Belfast Community Circus School* (Northen Ireland), *Galway Community Circus* (Republic of Ireland), *Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde* (France), *Cirkus Cirkör* (Sweden), *Cirqueon* (Czech Republic), *Zaltimbanq’* (Luxemburg), *Métis’Gwa* (Guadeloupe), *Skala* (Slovenia).

Each mobility was of one week in four different circus schools, where one (or two) TLU was delivered.

***Cirkus Cirkör – TLU D & E***

The first session took place in Stockholm, by a mild October weather, for a session dedicated to “circus technique and creativity” (TLU D), and “foundations” (TLU E). As a first meeting, each partner association did a quick presentation, which revealed the diversity in terms of size, experience and goals of this exchange.

**TLU D – Circus creativity and technique**

The goals of the first part of the training were to stimulate creativity, have stage awareness, encourage mixing circus skills and have good command of circus techniques as well as being able to teach them.

There were three sessions about creativity and one about circus technique. Creativity was explored in a way that tasks were simple, which gave space to interpretation and the energy to generate innovative solutions. First, with Ron Beeri, we were focused on circus creativity through juggling. Group rhythm, duo exercises, solo movements; we explored different games where imagination was the key point, and every sequence was trained and then shown to everybody, as to remember that sharing on stage is an important step in circus. We also explored the juggling and manipulation potential of a random object, like tea cup, wooden plank, watering can… With Tracy Stacy Stacks, a clown, creativity was aroused through games and their analysis all together. Those games were aimed to know each other better, of course, but also to trigger reactivity and playfulness, to foster complicity, and, finally, to speak about it all. What resulted from those discussions was that, whenever people are playing, so much energy can be involved, in body and in mind, which is able to break barriers between each other, and people are finally pushed to reveal more than usual. It also enlightened the fact that not everybody has the same experience in a given game. The game of “the puppet”, where a puppet master leads somebody with the palm of his/her hand and the follower must keep a fixed distance (of around 30 cm) from the hand, was a good example of it. Between total withdrawal, hypnotism, or anger, those games tend to show that everybody can have his/her own feeling and experience when playing games. With Toubab Holmes, creativity was explored through physical expression. A lot of time has been dedicated to finding in ourselves a connection with an object, a meaning, which would be expressed as an adjective. The exercise was to find adjectives for three objects, and the connections between them, expressed as verbs. Again, this kind of exercise was aimed to create our own answer to a given context. The rule was as simple as possible, but the interpretations were innumerable, because personal. The resulting movement was performed alone, or in interaction with others, and shown to a little audience, still to remember that creation, which is an inside process, is aimed to be seen by an outside eye. Another game used was about transitions: to find transitions from random positions in trios to the next one position. Again, the rule was simple, but had as many interpretations as possible.

Then, another part of the TLU D was about circus technique. With Toubab Holmes, we analysed the handstand: its structure, its morphology, and then the different parts that lead to a handstand. Toubab introduced the concept of “tool box”, which is a decomposition of the exercise into smaller exercises in order to intervene on the problematic step. Few examples of exercises were shown and tried to build up, piece by piece, a handstand. The principle of the tool box is, finally, to rationalize a circus skill or move, may it be acrobatic or juggling, and to cut it down into fragments that can all be independently exercised alone.

**TLU E – Foundations**

The TLU E session was covered through three questions which answers have been discussed by groups, and then all together:

* What is a role model, and what kind of model are we?
* How can we face the unexpected?
* What is a social circus trainer?

*What is a role model, and what kind of model are we?*

Being a social circus trainer, and by extension, a circus trainer, involve the fact that we are constantly facing people and trying to teach them things (from circus skills to social behaviour). Then, our image and the understanding of our role are essential in this process. The question can also be formulated as follow: are we aware to be a model towards our students? And do we assume that role? To those questions, necessary to conceive appropriately our job or our task, lots of answers have been made that will not be discussed in this report. Mainly, the biggest points that arose were 1) that a social circus trainer has to create a “safe place” in which people are free to express themselves (body and mind), 2) that to imitate somebody is a high sign of respect, and being in the position of a leader/teacher, many students would naturally be inclined to copy them; hence the importance to act responsibly, 3) that a key point is the notion of confidence, that has to be reached and kept; confidence in skills, in human qualities and in the respect of our possibilities.

*How can we face the unexpected?*

This topic has been explored by through the preparation of a part of a circus lesson for a given targeted group. We were divided in three teams, and while one team lead the 15 min lesson, the other two teams were playing the target group. The unexpected came 5 min before the start of our lesson, a new information came, about limitation or difficulties with our target group (ex.: sexually abused children). This exercise enlightened one big aspect of the work of a social circus trainer, *i.e.* to be able to face any difficulty, may it comes at the very last moment, because the professionalism in this field go through adaptability, and good team communication. The main limitation, though, to this exercise – which has been discussed during our evaluation – was that playing a target group is not relevant because it is made of prejudices. But this kind of exercises are worth a try anyway, if just to be accustomed to last minute change in a well-ordered plan.

*What is a social circus trainer?*

As for the first question, small groups were made to discuss this point and gathered to have a common talk. Again, the many answers given will not be discussed in this report, but mainly, the most important points were 1) that, again, a social circus trainer has to create a “safe place”, 2) that a social circus trainer is a circus teacher who’s not focusing mainly on technique, but using circus as an inclusive tool, 3) that the circus trainer has another view of the society and a different role, and is strongly willing to help, 4) and that circus trainers are not therapists, and then can’t possibly deliver a therapeutically adapted answer to a given problem.

***Sorin Sirkus – TLU B***

The second session happened in Tampere, Finland, during a snowy February. The TLU B focuses on how to create a teaching program, with long-term planning, defined objectives and personal evaluation. This module was entirely led by Simon I-don’t-remember-his-name, Tytti Vuolle and Kamilla Nisso.

A big part of this TLU has been dedicated to defining objectives according to target groups and their “breaking down”, meaning the sub-objectives that have to be accomplished to lead to the main objective. Few main objectives have been the topic of discussion, like “communication”, “cooperation”, “acknowledging the limits”, or “improved concentration”, and broken down into ways to get to it. Those sub-objectives have then been topics for the same exercise, showing that there can be a route of small objectives that can lead to a main idea. For instance, a possible break down of the objective “Better communication” would be “use of eye contact”. This one can be itself an objective with a structured plan to achieve it.

This led to the rationalization of a circus lesson, in terms of structure. How do we build a circus lesson? What are the main or necessary components? Few “boxes” seemed to unanimously emerge:

* Beginning (Welcome, intro, info…),
* Preparation (warm up, stretching, concentration or other social objective),
* Core of the lesson (skills, technique, creativity…),
* Cool down and end (clean up, relaxation, stretching, evaluation, feedback, next time…).

Then, the defined objective can be taken into account in the duration of every “box”, or lead to the creation of other ones. This rationalization of a circus lesson structure is a powerful tool for the planning of pedagogical activities and helping shaping a course.

The other point that was approached is the question of observation and feedbacks. What are we observing, why and how are keys to use for the collection of information, which can serve for a quality feedback. A theoretical discussion was followed by a practical exercise, where people would give a workshop and get personal feedbacks. It was then examined how to give and get a feedback: by which means? how? why? and when?

In summary, this very theoretical session had the objective to define our own objectives, and the multiple ways to try to achieve them, and then shape a year’s lesson.

***Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles – TLU C***

This third session took place in Bruxelles, Belgium, by a summer-like month of June. TLU C’s main purposes are about communication, learning, safety and group and conflict management, and were lead by Isabel van Maele and Steven Desanghere.

A first aspect of this session was centered on the ability to teach safely and efficiently something to somebody – which can appear to be the basic function of a teacher. So a first assumption was made according to this goal: we’d focus on a person-centered education rather than a group teaching, meaning that we’d focus on all the parameters (or at least as much as we can figure out) that can influence one person’s learning. This first assumption being made, several concepts, issued from social psychology or pedagogical theory, were discussed, such as:

* Does a person lack something before being able to learn anything?
* What are the role and/or status of a person in a group? What are the norms and rules (spoken or not) in this group?
* What are the different prejudices a person can be subjected to?

According to those parameters influencing a person’s feelings and behavior, the idea was that, in order to facilitate learning, a teacher should create a “safe learning container” – which can be linked to the idea of “safe place” discussed in the first session. The teacher should know all parameters that can have positive or negative effects on somebody’s ability to learn, to control them as much as possible and influence them.

This module was also focused on communication and the different learning styles of people in general. We discussed the main theories of the brain and their related learning styles: Kolb, Gardner, Benziger, McCarthy. From those informations, we tried to extract the different pathways of (good) learning, and find the key points that would enable any student to learn efficiently, or with pleasure.

Another part of this TLU was called “how to lead a workshop” and was questioning the position of the teacher in front of the students/learners. What is a teacher and what are his/her possibilities? We were there speaking of the different roles that a teacher can hold (the theory of “policeman/clown/nurse”), as well as the different levels of sharing responsibilities between a tutor and the learners. What makes it possible/impossible to teach a group?

A third topic in this session was dedicated to conflict and aggression management. In this part, we investigated the different paths of behavior that can lead to an aggression, the relationships between people (relation of force, or minor/major relationship), and the different kind of aggressions. Although this topic is wide and can’t have a miraculous solution, we were discussing of the different theories concerning de-escalation of violence and some non-aggressive communication tools.

Finally, we had a discussion about “why does circus work?”, using the theory of the hand of Bolton to find out what makes circus so special from an educational point of view.

***Belfast Community Center / LPPCM – TLU A***

The final session of our CTF in Action happened in the city of Belfast, Northern Ireland, in September, by a classical forever-changing Irish weather. This part was delivered both by *Belfast Community Center* and *Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde*, and this TLU focuses on “social context”. As a last session, lots of topics were overlapping topics already discussed previously, which made it shorter.

The content of this TLU explored the identification of the key issues of social circus. People were then invited to give their definition of social circus, as well as their different aspect. It is interesting to observe that almost all definitions comprise the ideas of: social inclusion, self-confidence, personal improvement and fun. As a personal point of view, I would like to stress the fact that often, fun is present in teachers’ description of circus, but absent from official definition of social circus; as if fun would more be a tool than a goal. I personally disagree with it, thinking that fun is as important like a goal as it is powerful like a tool. However, fun is commonly mentioned when speaking about circus in general, and especially social circus projects.

A big part of this TLU was also dedicated to the understanding of the different target groups, and especially speaking about inclusion, exclusion, prejudices, what is a culture?... It is here unnecessary to list exhaustively all answers made, but those questions are important to be raised in order to be aware of their importance in everyday life, and thus in social circus projects. Whenever we ask the question “how can we exclude somebody?” and “how can we include somebody?”, we naturally find more sensibility on this topic and become aware of our good and bad practice, and also what is possible to do if we want to include everybody. As a “practical” example, we watched the film *Parada*, based on the true story of a French clown going to Hungary for humanitarian purposes through NGOs, and end up helping kids in the sewers of the cities by teaching them circus.

Finally, we discussed our own position in our organizations, asking ourselves the questions: where are we in this organization? Do I understand my organization? Am I an actor of the objectives of it? Is there a definition of social circus and do I agree with it? This part was mainly here to encourage people thinking about their environment and their involvement.

It is hard and may be meaningless to try to summarize such a big piece of work, but Caravan Circus’ goal to reflect on the means and meanings of social circus has been thoroughly investigated through very pertinent ways of reflections (called “Main competences”), themselves divided into exhaustive topics. This one-year-long thinking in such a diverse group has also brought up interesting points of view that went sometimes even further than expected. Nonetheless, whoever would be interested in further (or in-depth) reading about CTF in Action can have a look to the on-line Guidebook for Social Circus Trainers, the base of our training.