

CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS AS COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS LEARNING AT THE CORE OF THE MISSION

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There is a growing trend of talking/writing about the educational mission of cultural organisations, at least between the professionals of the culture field. (But not enough some would say). I'm not going to challenge the way this educational mission is defined and understood in relation with the public and the community by many of my colleagues, at least not now. But I want to bring into discussion one aspect that I consider crucial for a cultural institution aiming to fully act as an education provider for its public: first of all it needs to be a learning *organisation*. And by this I mean an institution that focuses on its development as an organisation, elaborates and pursues on continuous basis ways to bring and preserve knowledge and skills *into* the organisation, to interact with its public and to learn from this interaction. Somehow it seems obvious: in order to teach or train someone, first you have to have the knowledge or the skills. But in order to be a better teacher or trainer, you have to continue to learn. If you want to be a promoter of lifelong learning, you must be a lifelong learner yourself. Of course, giving a definition of a learning organisation or of what organisational development could mean for a cultural institution might seem secondary to the question of *how*? How do we plan and conduct a process of organisational development? How do we transform museums, libraries, cultural centres in providers of adult educators with the capacity of creating learning processes for both the public and the organisation? How do we place learning at the centre of our institutional mission?

There is no simple answer. At the Centre for Professional Training in Culture we had the possibility to tackle some of these questions in the framework of one project that is still in implementation. CONNECTION – Cultural Organisations as Communication and Learning Environments is a project coordinated by the Centre for Professional Training in Culture from October 2007 to September 2009, financed in the framework of the programme Lifelong Learning – Grundtvig sub-programme.

CONNECTION project aims to promote learning as social constructivism and to improve the capacity of cultural institutions to be active players in adult education field, to forge new relations with and within the community and to contribute to the social cohesion and cultural dialogue. The main activities of the project include research activities, design and testing of educational materials destined to cultural professionals, cultural managers and trainers from the field of adult education. They were conceived and conducted as to involve and support the employees and institutions from adult education field, especially the ones developing non formal and informal educational programmes and activities.

First year of the project comprised a research carried out by project partners from the 5 countries participating in the project – Romania, Bulgaria, Italy, Turkey and Lithuania, on the educational activities and practices of cultural institutions – museums, libraries, cultural centres and the training needs of cultural professionals and

managers. An element of innovation was represented by the series of case studies elaborated after a process of organizational analysis was carried in a limited number of cultural organisations. This in-depth analysis had a strong piloting character, cultural institutions from participating countries never being confronted before with this type of organizational approach. The aim of the organizational analysis was to identify those inside elements and/or factors contributing or impeding the fulfillment of the organisation's educational mission. A large range of elements were taken into consideration: institutional framework of the organization, its dimension in terms of number of employees and annual budget, funding sources, history, organisational scheme, internal rules and regulations, type of activities undertaken by the organisation, personnel structure, spatial distribution and job description and recruiting system. As research methods and instruments were used document analysis, questionnaires, interviews with staff and managers. Conclusions of the analysis concentrated on organisation's relation with its beneficiaries, as perceive and described by employees, on the specific processes of development and organisation of educational activities and programmes, on the ways cultural professionals are sustained and encouraged to get involved in delivery of educational programmes and to develop their skills and competencies for working with adults.

What resulted in the end is not necessarily a collection of best practices since the cultural organisations that took part in the research were not selected on performance criteria, but rather on their willingness to participate to this somehow unusual process. It is mainly a pretext and an invitation to reflection and further analysis on what organizational development is and/or should be for cultural organizations.

This invitation to reflection is originated in real contexts and addressed to cultural professionals, cultural managers, trainers and decision-makers from the field of culture and education.

We present you below one case study from the research results; the interested readers can find the full version of the research report, including case studies from all 5 countries, on the project website www.connection-eu.eu

Study case from Bulgaria

The organisation analyzed by our Bulgarian partner is a municipal public museum under the methodological supervision of Ministry of Culture, and under the financial and administrative supervision of the Municipality. Established in 1972, it is a successor of the local folklore humour and the merry carnival traditions of the town. The museum collects humour and satire in cartoons, photographs, paintings and sculpture from all four corners of the world; it holds international humour events, and encourage both young and established artists to create humorous works; it exhibits, promotes and sells humorous art; publishes albums and collections of visual and verbal humour; offers educational programs for small and "grown-up" children; maintains lively contacts and beneficial cooperation with similar institutes in the world. Due the economical crisis of the country during the 1994-1999, the organisation become had become unable to organise and support one of its major events dedicated to cinematography.

As organisational scheme, it has a vertical structure. There is one Council of Managers composed by the general manager and the managers of the six departments. The departments are: Fine arts, exhibitions

and art collections, Guided tours, tourist marketing, publicity, public relations and events, international contacts, Ethnology and literature, Information services, computer data-base, documentation and archives, Finances and book-keeping, Administrative matters, maintenance and technical facilities. Departments within organisation do not have a formal connection between them.

Types of activities undertaken by the organisation: exhibitions, concerts, public lectures, anniversary events, conferences, launch books, publishing books, book fairs, round tables, seminars, colloquies, debates, educational programmes for adult persons, information services (for community) and activities involving voluntary people.

At the research moment, the museum counted 26 employees, all of them sharing the same building. Departments comprise 3 to 4 staff, including the departments' managers.

Job descriptions are developed for groups of job positions and not for each one of the 26 job positions. These groups are heads of department, guides, analytic specialists, special workers. The organisation uses only internal resources for selection and employment of personnel.

There were no information on the rules and regulations which may be applicable to the organisation, except the Financial Management and Control System (FMCS). Thus, as the organisation works under the methodological supervision of the Ministry of Culture, it is possible to say that there is a system established at national level for all the museums.

The financial sources are: the local (municipality) budget, own incomes of the museum, donations.

Internal survey was conducted through questionnaires and interviews. The cross analysis of questionnaires and interviews shows the following results:

a) the organisation's staff gave the same relevance to all the activities organised by the organisation. Thus, seems that a majority of staff appreciate the activities dedicated to children to be slightly significant amongst the others.

b) all types and categories of public have the same importance for the organisation. On the other hand, there are no special activities dedicated to very special groups of public like convicted persons.

c) the beneficiaries' interests and expectations are identified on the basis of needs identification, realised within the process of development of new activities or programmes.

d) the information system within organisation is a combination between formal and informal approaches. There are used internal meetings and information technology (mail, online discussions, videoconferences, intranet etc). According to employees opinions, due to the fact that the number of staff is not very high, meetings are organised periodically involving all personnel.

e) The sources of information about beneficiaries' needs and expectations are various: the personal observations of staff but also from discussions with colleagues, from beneficiaries' reactions, from the managers, from mass-media.

f) The majority of staff is aware about the existence of an annual plan of activities.

g) The organisation staff is interested to participate to training programmes, the same interest being proved by the managerial level too. Usually, the personnel participate to training programmes according their own needs, upon a request to the manager.

General conclusion of the survey:

- the organisation is very well aware by its unique character in Bulgaria.

- the organisation uses in a very successful way the connection with a NGO established specially to support its mission and activities.

- the organisation seems to be a mixture between a NGO (self governance) and a public body (subject for national level rules).

The above mentioned characteristics of organisation made it quite independent in relation with external public-type factors. The organisation's staffs make efforts in order to obtain donations and other private financial support for the activities and projects.

The adult education does not represent a priority for organisation, such programmes being more incidental than a priority. Furthermore, apparently due to the main topic of the organisation activity (humour), the educational programmes are aimed mainly to young target groups. What it is very important is the way in which the organisation is trying to adapt itself and its activities to public and the way in which the organisation reaches the mass-media attention for its programmes. Nevertheless, the organisation analysed can be a model of long-term development by the means of a collaborative way during the decisional processes on new project or ideas.

Partner organization conducting the research: INTEGRA Association (Bulgaria).

