

Inspired by cultural Diversity Krater Amsterdam in cooperation with school

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Introduction

First of all, I would like to give you a general picture of our organization, our activities and the area of Amsterdam we work in.

Krater is a small creative company that started to organize youth theatre events twenty-five years ago. In the beginning, we organized youth theatre performances to take place in our area. Nowadays, we have developed ourselves into a cultural organization that operates not only in the field of performing arts, but also has a specialized educational section, that develops art programmes for school in various disciplines: dance, art and drama.

I use the word specialized because we work in a colourful area, with people from all over the world, especially Surinam, The Caribbean and Africa.

The diversity of all these different backgrounds is a challenge for us as program developers; we are making an effort to use all the stories, values and symbols of the various cultures, and invent creative projects from them.

We are inspired by the diversity in our society and want to offer a range of high quality activities.

How do we organize all this?

So how do we get all this to work?

In the south-eastern part of Amsterdam, where approximately 90.000 people live, there are 32 primary schools.

These are religious and non-religious schools, as well as special schools for children with learning difficulties. We also maintain contacts with so called art-magnetschools: these schools already have a big focus on using the various forms of art as a means to improve the learning abilities of the children. (I will talk more about this later in the examples: Rozemarn)

Every year in springtime, all the schools receive our brochure (on the table) which contains all our latest projects.

Through the years we've built up a network of personal contacts inside the schools, and we are still investing time in it, for instance by personally delivering the brochure. We have experienced that having a focus point inside the school is very important. Once there is for instance a cultural coordinator inside the school, or a person with a special interest in art projects, it's much easier for us to make plans and appointments.

Once the school received the brochure, they can choose from all the possibilities, of course also depending on their budget. I will come back to this point later. After the schools have made their choices, and the money has been arranged, we start organizing.

First, we contact our freelance employees.

We work with experienced Art teachers who have the ability to deal with diversity in culture in a respectful and creative way.

Then we make a time schedule of the activities in cooperation with the school.

After that, the coordinator goes to the school and prepares the teachers for the coming activities, so they know what to expect and what is expected of them.

Once the program is running, the coordinator visits the activity and afterwards evaluates the project with the teachers.

Examples

In general, our projects can be divided in the specific fields of art, drama and dance.

Some projects involve more than one discipline.

Next to that, there are specially developed projects on the school's request.

All the projects take place during school time.

(We also divide the activities in different age groups of primary schools.)

Now I would like to give you some examples of our work.

Last year, we have developed a multi-disciplined project in a school: this was a "Project on Request".

The project involved dance, music, art and drama and was written around the theme "**Creation Stories**".

The school had asked Krater to develop a project that involved participation of all 230 children, and included a performance at the end.

The children in the highest classes started with an art and writing program, in which they were inspired by old creation myths from different cultures. They wrote their stories down on a special piece of material, and made a picture on the other side. All these pieces of story-art were put together and made into a tower: the Tower of Stories.

These Towers were used as a decoration for the big multi-disciplinary closing performance.

The children from the lower and middle classes practiced theatre-, music and dance scenes. All this put together ended up in a large spectacle in which the various viewpoints concerning our origins were emphasized and acted out.

Another example I would like to draw attention to is "**Storytelling Objects**".

In this project children first visit a museum on the small island of Marken. Here, an ancient world is being brought back to life by actors who tell the children about objects that are special in their daily lives.

These objects become valuable because of the stories that are hidden inside of them, not because of their antiqueness or artistic value.

Back in school, the children all bring a special something from their home. They paint, take photographs and write about their own special objects. They also make a special showcase to exhibit their object. At the end, there is an exhibition of all the showcases in the school.

I have already spoken about a type of school called the Art-magnet school. In this school type, art is being used specifically to improve the learning abilities of children. One of the schools in our area has asked us to develop dance and drama lessons in addition to their language learning program. Experience has indicated that the language learning abilities of these children are improving because of the added dance and drama techniques.

It seems that they remember more, better and learn faster. And, on top of that, they have more fun in learning, which, in the opinion of their teachers, has a positive effect on their learning attitude.

Besides activities in school time, we also organize after school activities. I would like to give some examples: first the Summer Festival.

We organize this festival every year during the summer holidays. It involves programming several youth theatre performances. This year for the first time we also planned several free workshops, so the children could subscribe for dance, drama and art making activities.

Another after school activity is the so-called Theatre-Visitors group.

School can subscribe for this activity, and in cooperation with our youth theatre programmer make a selection from all the performances.

This activity gives children, who would normally never or seldom go to a theatre performance, the possibility of a new experience.

From the age of six, children not only have the possibility to watch theatre, they can also subscribe for theatre lessons.

In 1999, the **Youth Theatre School Southeast** was founded by Krater and Kunstweb, another cultural education centre in Amsterdam.

This initiative has been very successful ever since: there are now almost 300 children from 6 to 16 years old who are following theatre lessons.

As a teacher and director, I am also personally connected to this school; and I have seen that this initiative is giving children a unique possibility to explore and develop their talents. From the age of ten, children also follow lessons in dance and vocal techniques.

How do we finance all this?

A crucial question: how to get the money for all these exciting activities?

The answer is not simple, financing the projects requires a lot of creativity.

The schools have a budget for cultural activities and welfare activities. They can use both these budgets to finance a project. However, the schools get less money every year, so it becomes more and more difficult.

Our goal is to become part of the educational infrastructure, financed by the government so we don't have to be dependent on these small budgets anymore. At the moment the municipal government is evaluating this subject, and might give a perspective.

In spite of the fact that our projects are not cheap, the school pays 45.- Euro an hour to participate in a program, they apply for our projects because of the themes and the contents that always contain a multi-cultural aspect.

This year, we reach 12 schools and 2500 children with our projects, with a total of 28 projects.

Sometimes we don't get response from a school, and that can have several reasons. There is a shortage of teachers, especially in our area. This means that in some schools people simply don't have the time and attention to go beyond the regular learning program: this in itself is difficult enough.

The teachers are under pressure anyway: there are a lot of tests to be done, and the focus on the cognitive aspects of learning can be very strong. So doing something extra is sometimes experienced as a loss of time in terms of the general learning program. (Of course this is a matter of discussion!)

Vision

This brings me to the vision our company stands for, when it comes to the position cultural education should have in schools.

We think taking part in and enjoying cultural activities is an essential experience, adding to a sense of freedom, well-being and development of people from all cultures. In any form of artistic activity, people, from whatever culture, give expression to their feelings, imagination, creativity, experience, mindsets and cultural heritage that they carry with them.

The South-eastern part of Amsterdam has a big variety of cultures and art forms and therefore of ways of experiencing art.

We see it as a challenge to emphasize a movement within this situation that makes people curious about each other, sometimes to confront, to recognize and understand, to exchange and to cooperate.

A final story: The Story of Sue

To close this lecture, I would like to take you all on a small journey.

It starts in a bookstore, six years ago, and ends in an African country called Namibia. Six years ago I already worked for Krater, not as a project coordinator but as a drama teacher and project developer.

I was asked to develop a project for the youngest children in the primary school, involving drama and art. So I went to a bookstore looking for inspiration. There I almost immediately found a book called Eefje Donkerblauw, Sue Darkblue. This little

blue princess, living inside her own private blue world, one day decides to go out and discovers a whole new universe. She meets a yellow king, marries him in the end and together they build a whole new world.

This story was the basis for a four lesson project involving drama and art, and has been performed in many schools. The project obviously gives children a message about integration and being curious about each other in a metaphorical way.

Last year I hired a drama teacher to do the project in a school, and she did. But when she finished, things really got started: she told me about her foundation, The Theatre Embassy. This Embassy brings theatre projects to third world countries and works with children and adults all over the world. Then a plan was born: we could cooperatively bring little Sue to Namibia, where people had asked for a program involving cultural diversity and integration.

So we wrote a plan, got fundraising, and almost before we knew it, we were on a plane to Southern Africa. We were able to train seven people in the project of Sue Darkblue, and so this project is now implemented somewhere at the other end of the globe.