Let’s boost Creativity in Social Work Education and social work

Bennyé D. Austring, University College Zealand, Denmark

Creativity is a basal human ability that has put Man in a position to create the complex global society as we know it today. Although most people connect creativity with art and art based (aesthetic) activities the ability does not belong here exclusively. In educational terms it is a ‘cross professional’ phenomenon.

Still, the arts and the art based educational disciplines offer a long row of proven experience within development, support and maintenance of creativity, experience of essential importance as basis for the innovation and entrepreneurship needed. Creativity is pure gold in an economical perspective, but – more important – it is an ability vital to everybody in order to achieve the best life possible. Thus, it takes quite a lot of creativity for a child figuring out the whole world and mastering it. Here the well-educated social worker has a crucial mission of support.

In all art based disciplines of social work education, teacher education and art therapy educations exists a long and valuable tradition for weighting and operationalizing creative methods and mindsets. But although creativity is in high demand these years, it seems that there is but little focus on the potentials of these disciplines. This is quite a paradox, building upon unfruitful polar opposites like ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ educational competences, emotion versus reason, subjectivity versus objectivity, theory versus praxis etc.

The paradox has also historic dimensions. In late nineteenth century in Denmark Music, Visual Arts and Drama was among the main disciplines during the establishment of early social pedagogic institutions as the Rousseau-, Dewey- and Freire inspired Reform Pedagogy era was blooming, replacing the stiffening remains of the authoritarian ‘Latin school’. During the twentieth century – especially after the inhumanities of World Wars – it turned into a paradigm shift promoting a view upon pedagogy as a tool for supporting and unfolding children’s natural abilities, among these creativity and democratic thinking.

Today this pedagogic philosophy is somehow weakening and receding into the background. Instead the economic crises in USA and Europe seem to have sharpened the focus on children as keepers and suppliers of future wealth and prosperity. This focus is not new of course; the news is that it is significantly intensified.

In Denmark the change from ‘welfare state’ towards a kind of ‘competition state’ affects the view upon pedagogic and education strongly and fast. As recently as 2006 the art based disciplines represented 40 % of the entire Bachelor in Social Education, from 2007 only about 17 %, and in the latest version of the education from August 2014 they are reduced to merely ‘dimensions’ of the students’ pedagogic knowledge and competences. Moreover, in the social pedagogic specialization branch of the education art based education is no longer present at all. - Where does this leave the coming social workers and their clients?

This movement from a broad humanistic view upon creativity as a tool for the individual’s good life towards a more socio-economical framed focus is now the ruling terms and conditions in education, like it or not. But do these views automatically exclude each other? In my opinion the effort to gain individually good
lives through creative thinking and activities link well with society’s requirements for creative citizens and employees.

As teachers and researchers of art based subjects we are maybe too invisible in the ongoing value debates. Often we are a minority in the local staff and we might therefore have a tendency to inwardly entrenching our disciplines while outwardly trying hard to legitimate our academic competences. If so, this does not dissolve the paradox mentioned above.

The fact that we actually support and develop creativity through teaching the arts and aesthetics is a ‘capital’ not yet fully implemented into the prevailing educational cost-benefit thinking. Personally, I do not like the economic discourse in relation to social education and social work, but if we want to communicate with decision makers, among whom you seldom see representatives of art based learning, we need to use a language they understand. To many of those, Music, Dance, Drama, Theatre and Visual arts is something ‘nice to have’ while creativity is ‘need to have’, so let us bring into attention the clear link between art based learning and creativity development.

New scientific research results prove positive effects and learning transfer when using good aesthetic learning processes in schools and kindergartens (e.g. Bamford 2006, Catterall 2009, DICE 2010, Winner, Goldstein and Vincent-Lancrin 2013). What we need to do now is to implement these results in our teaching and to strengthen European research within our teaching disciplines and subjects by co-operating internationally. Here the new INECS platform can be an important tool for creating partnership projects and for exchanging professional points of view, experience, expertise, gaining and findings within education and research.

What are we waiting for?

References:
Bamford, Anne (2006): The WOW Factor. Global research compendium on the impact of the arts in education. Waxmann Verlag, Münster, Germany
DICE Consortium (2010): The DICE has been cast. Research findings and recommendations on educational theatre and drama. www.dramanetwork.eu

Cand. Mag. Bennýé D. Austring (bau@ucsj.dk) is a former actor, now a teacher of Drama, project manager, international course coordinator and co-founder of the INECS network. Also he is an author and co-author of a number of Danish textbooks and articles on art based learning, some of them in English.