Abstract

Sloyd Circus - the Swedish Handicraft organisation’s largest project for children. The Swedish government appointed Sloyd Circus to carry out a three-year national commission in the field of child culture from 2004-2006. Part of the money was earmarked for research. The circus toured Sweden in a circus tent, and gave a performance conducted by a team of three young skilled craft tutors and three artists (dancer, musician and actor). Children were invited to take part in a very interactive performance. The artists created an atmosphere that promoted aesthetic learning. The craft tutors worked hard to promote a gender-neutral environment in the workshops, skilfully manoeuvering past the “treacherous underwater rocks” of gender and multicultural issues. They inspired the children to venture beyond their usual roles by showing them adults who “dared”, and by inviting them into a room that did not signal differences between people or cultures.

Keywords: craft, sloyd, circus, aestethic learning, gender
Introduction

"We have something to tell the children about sloyd, to be able to do things yourself, to make your body do what you want. To work with sloyd, in the way we do in the Handicraft movement in Sweden, means that you use your entire body. You are very close to nature, bending, pressing, following, using tools that can be dangerous if you use them incorrectly. These things give self-confidence.

We borrow the circular space from the circus, with the expectations that arise within us when the circus comes to town, bringing the exotic and the special.

We have something to say to the children about sloyd and fantasy, and we want to do that together with the storyteller from the theatre, and musicians. The Handicraft movement has strong esthetical values. They have decorated, painted and made beautiful things in a folklore tradition...

Children are not necessarily interested in the dovetailed box-corners or the provincial stitching on tablecloths that can be seen in the display cases of museums. Children are interested in playing, using their bodies in moving, surpassing themselves, becoming competent. That is why we hold Sloydcircus for children. For the grown-ups we offer Sloydcircus as a well of inspiration./.../

This is the way Sloyd Circus was presented as an idea in the year 2001\(^1\). The idea aroused the interest of important donors, and the Swedish Handicraft organisations largest project became a reality. In addition, the Swedish government appointed Sloyd Circus to carry out a three-year national commission in the field of child culture from 2004-2006. Part of the money was earmarked for research, the starting point of this research-based evaluation.

Aim

The aim of the evaluation was to study the pedagogic process with respect to:

- Children: in what ways do children learn in a different learning environment?

- Adults in relation to children: how does the project influence their pedagogical approach?

- Storytelling, music, dance and handicraft: how are the content and ways of working in these areas developed in a cross cultural meeting?

\(^1\) Sloyd Circus, or as in Swedish, Slöjdcirkus means handicraft circus. The word slöjd was translated to sloyd in the late 1800 when Sweden had a leading role in sloyd education in schools not only in Sweden but in many places all over the world. This is the way it is translated into English in the project’s official documents.
Research methods

The research methods used in this project are influenced by ethnography Kullberg. To capture a phenomenon as complex as Sloyd Circus, it was necessary to use a variety of tools. The first and most important was having a close relation to a gate keeper. Kristin Boström, the project leader, gave us access to the field in a generous way, expressing an awareness of the opportunity to glean valuable information for the project, from the research that was produced.

The researcher, Susanne Björkdahl Ordell and Gunni Kärrby, had direct access to the staff, before the Sloyd Circus tour started. Staff were asked to help us by writing logs (diaries) which gave us valuable inside information. Many hours were spent observing and talking to children and adults in- and outside the circus tent. To use a camera demanded parental approval, according to ethical rules for research, so we only took pictures when we had parents and children together in a performance. Using the video camera demanded the same approval. Video was used to capture the interaction between children and staff. After a day’s performance, we all gathered to discuss the way the project was going. These so-called focus group interviews gave us researchers an unique chance to put forward questions which were discussed by the group from different perspectives, (Davidsson 2007).

RESULTS

As a starting point a description of the ambitious work to pre-plan this grand circus tour is presented under the heading five ground elements. These elements created what come to be labelled Sloyd Circus Pedagogy forming a supporting structure for what took place in a performance. The chapter ends with what we researcher saw in regard to our three aims with the study; Sloyd Circus as a pedagogical arena.

Five ground elements in the pre-planning

From the beginning a project “inspiration group” was given responsibility for the creation of the space. In this group the first cross-cultural meeting was conducted. The project leader,
Kristin Boström, was also the leader of this group. She has formulated the following five corner stones.

Sloyd Circus was created from a developmental and educational perspective. During the time of preplanning a great focus was put on the following five ground elements

- shaping of the space,
- cross-cultural meeting,
- gender aspect,
- multi-cultural aspect,
- and the pedagogical approach.

Sloyd, storytelling, music and dance were seen as different ways of expression, with equal value.

The first thing that met the visitor to Sloyd Circus was the experience of light, smell, and colours – and that the space was so different from all others. Sloyd Circus was a tent. The floor of 154 square meters, was made of rough, interlocking, sawed planks from lark tree. There were four workshops, an entrée, dressing rooms and the gallery, all in a circle facing the main ring.

Nomad life was the point of departure for the inspiration group, which led to thoughts about mobility, minimalism, and not bringing too much. For example, there were no tables in the workshops. Benches and other interior design elements had many uses. The association to shepherding and Nordic summer inspired the colour palette of white, red, green, black and gold, like the circus gold.

**Shaping of the space**

The inspiration group had designed the set-up for the work in the tent. The space could be seen as a stage, where children, handicraft tutors, and artists interacted with each other. When artists and handicraft tutors were in the tent at the same time, they could observe and inspire each other, and learn from the other’s way of handling relations to the children. Openness and secludedness coexisted. Craft tutors and artists used the shape of the space to create the rhythm of the performance, between the introvert and the extrovert, between the individual and the collective. The circular shape was important, because no corner and no thing were further away than anything else. A few steps and every one were gathered in the main ring.
The space was surprising. The rough and the delicate were there simultaneously. The white tent canvas let the light through. In daytime when the sun was shining, birds that flew by, or the artists cast shadows on the canvas. At night the light from within turned the tent into a lantern.

*The cross-culture meeting*

The main idea of this project was a belief that a cross-cultural cooperation would lead to something more than each part could achieve on their own. The artist co-operative called Big Wind, which provided musicians, dancers and actors, enriched the whole project by its choreographer who added movement and dance as a natural part of the cross-cultural meeting.

In Sloyd Circus it was the quality in this cross-cultural meeting between handicraft tutors, actors, dancers and musicians that created the conditions in which the children grew and learned. The staff used materials and their knowledge to entice creativity. Craft, music, storytelling and dancing were equally valued as means of expression.

*Male and female*

The Sloyd Circus touring staff consisted of equal numbers of men and women. Every craft tutor was knowledgeable in woodwork as well as textile work. Sloyd Circus had four workshops. The names of the work shops were chosen not to connect to the different handicraft arts, and the children used both wood and textile to finish their products. The workshops were equipped with basic tools (scissors and pins, knives and axes) and materials that were easy to work with, like wool, linen and fresh wood.

*The pedagogical approach*

To explore and investigate. The Handicraft Movement is a part of the Swedish cultural heritage and has for generations been transformed as it has been handed down. Could the Handicraft movement’s “own pedagogy”, its way of teaching by copying, be used in present time? Instead of choosing to eliminate this tradition of imitation, each meeting with the children started there. Imitation is closely linked to the way small children learn, but for the older children (the target group for Sloyd Circus, ages 7 – 14), the time spent copying gave the child a chance to concentrate on tactile experiences, on their own hands, on how tools and materials felt, to then add fantasy to what they were doing.
The multicultural aspect

The inspiration for the interior design of the tent came from all over the world and interpreted of Sloyd Circus. The multicultural was not limited, but was built into the context of the artefacts and it found expression in the artists’ storytelling, music and dance. Every child could find a way of associating to the handicrafts. The big wooden bells used by the artists were inspired from ritual wooden bells from Bali, but in Sloyd Circus made of a 250 year old pine tree from Sweden. The first story that met the visitor was a Guatemalan story about the creation of the world. The inspiration for the walls between workshops came from the Mongolian yurt. Craft is a global phenomenon. Like epic stories – they have different expressions in different cultures, and they travel.

This is the way a performance was conducted

Sloyd Circus toured the country for two summers of 2004 and 2005 and had about 13 000 visitors, roughly as many children as adults. It visited 16 places from Karlshamn in the south to Kalix in the north. The 154 square meter tent held a total of 50 people, including staff.

The circus stayed for a fortnight. It demanded a careful planning to raise and take down the tent and to transport it. All material was kept in two containers. The touring personal lived in campers and trailers. They were responsible for keeping the tent connected to the alarm system and one of them was always on duty. This meant they lived close to the circus tent, mostly just a couple meters away. Work started early in the morning with a meeting for everyone who would work in the tent that day. Everything had to be in place and details coordinated with staff who would work outside the tent.

Most of the performances were contracted beforehand by schools, or by individual adults and children, because the concept demanded participation in an entire “show”. The most common were 3-hour performances. This length suited the schools best, and it was the optimal way of reaching many visitors. Longer shows, lasting one day or two days, attracted fewer visitors.

The performance varied depending on the group or the time allotted, but there was a built-in order that remained the same. Artists met the children, accompanying adults, and handicraft tutors outside the tent. To music everyone took hands and wound in a spiralling folkdance
around the flagpole that (for the visitors) ended on the gallery. During the dance, everyone had moved and everyone had seen one other. Together, the group’s members would experience Sloyd Circus for three hours. After the Welcome song and the presentation the artists took over the stage and performed “Hurracan”, a world creation story from Guatemala about how man and woman were created. Two gods meet in heaven to create the earth. One of the gods, Hurracan is big, noisy and strong and was always played by a woman, the other god, called Feather snake was weak and shy and always played by a man. You did not yet see into the workshops, thin silk draperies were hiding them.

After this the craft/sloyd begun. A lottery allotted the children to one of the four workshops using wooden pieces of different colours. The children followed each tutor into the workshop. The tutor presented himself/herself by writing a nametag and putting it on. After this, the participants presented themselves, and received tags written by the tutor. The nametags were one the rituals of Sloyd Circus. The tutor’s writing was a gesture of interest in the children, - I see you and we will work together in these workshops and we can call on each other by name even if we do not know each other. The tutor would then introduce the name of the workshop. A comparatively long working period followed that was devoted to craft/sloyd. The silk curtains which served as the background when the actors performed Hurracan were taken away, and the children became aware of sitting in a big room. The artists would pass by once in a while talking to the children, when they were not sitting on the gallery. By playing different instruments or singing, they affected the atmosphere. Sometimes one or more of the children went to the players to see what they were doing or to take a break. They were encouraged to walk around in the tent.

It was strikingly quiet during the first part of a performance. The silence was broken when the artists invited everyone to join the “Stick school”, which was a rhythm exercise using one big stick held like a walking stick and hit by a small stick to enforce the rhythm. Connected to this were different exercises, which together was called the “Stick school”. This school introduced a lot of hopping, moving and shouting. After this the children went back to their workshops. The artists took care of those children who had a hard time concentrating on the crafts. For instance, they could go outside the tent to practice blowing in cow horn, or borrow instruments from the artists. The big drum was popular.
At the end the artists came in to sing the sweep-the-floor song. To sweep the floor and clean up the workshop was part of the program, before the artists one last time gathered the visitors on the gallery to perform the last story for that specific group. They could for instance use the handmade marionettes that were part of the interior of the tent. The first year the children held up what they had done in front of the group, the second year the ending changed to focus on the “treasure chest of words “ (found in the Finnish Epos Kalevala).

**Sloyd Circus as a pedagogical arena**

What do children learn in this arena? There was an explicit educational/pedagogical interest on the part of the project leaders. They wanted to use new pedagogical approaches to reach out to children in an attempt to get them interested in sloyd. It was a challenge for us researchers to see what kind of learning takes place in such a context, outside well-established institutions like schools. The content of learning was also different, in the sense that this was an aesthetic experiment offering the child different forms of expression.

**A cross culture meeting**

Sloyd and circus were linked in a complicated relationship. The artists had responsibility for the circus part, intended to create an atmosphere. Vygotsky (1995) argues that a piece of art like a novel, music or theatre widens and deepens feelings. This is something we have seen many times in the introductory part of the performance. The children get hooked on the feeling by the dance, music and storytelling. They themselves have just performed the introductory dance indoors. The atmosphere can be thick. We observed how the children left behind everything that was outside this tent. They will then follow the tutor to their assigned workshop, which means that something new will start. When the tutors take over, the atmosphere changes. They spoke to the children matter of factly, but with great enthusiasm and empathy.

The artists will also adopt the role of pedagogue, but in their own way. They take care of children who prefer to test musical instruments or practice dance. The children dare to try out new roles, such as the role of a carpenter with both axe and knife, or the role as a dancer or musician. The artists express a wish that children should meet adults who can go in and out of different roles, and can prod children to do the same – to learn something about themselves, even to learn something about life – about how it is to live. The tutors in crafts are more down
to earth in their wishes. They want the children to discover that they can manage to do things they never tried before. To experience they can succeed if they just dare to try.

At its best, crafts and circus collaborate to create a whole. The children, when asked, do not see craft and circus as different parts, they just embrace the concept without hesitation. Grown ups are more reflective focusing on the traditional differences in what craft and circus normally stand for.

DISCUSSION

Learning in an extramural context

Learning means change and new ways of thinking. Aesthetics take form in different gestalts where feelings, knowledge and experience contribute to a change in thinking and ideas (Aulin Gråhamn & Thavenius 2003). Does Sloyd Circus contribute to aesthetic learning processes?

From a sociocultural perspective, learning takes place through collaboration and communication. Learning is related to the situation; the context and the surroundings, which are interpreted through collaboration and active exchange between people and between people and artefacts (Säljö 2000). The artefacts “speak” but their language can only be understood in a social and cultural connection. The artefacts are charged by the atmosphere in the tent.

The relation between product and process is something that has changed during the two years Sloyd Circus has toured. The meeting between sloyd and circus created new points of view. As the performance takes shape, the overall impact exceeds that of the different parts. On behalf of the sloyd this meant that the focus was more on the child than on the product. Children are not so focused on the product, and do not care too much if it gets finished. On behalf of the circus, this meant that the ending of the performance was changed. Instead of having the children show their products, they use the “Treasure chest of words”. The words, which are all verbs, mirror processes instead of products. The staff asks the children to pick a verb in the chest and associate to something they have made. The verbs can be carving, dancing, thinking, dreaming etc. The staff were much more content with this ending.
Individual or collective

A contrast between the individual and the collective is another perspective from which you can analyse what take place in a performance. Historically, the craftsman has mostly been an individual working on his own; the circus on the other hand is collective. In Sloyd Circus the activities change between the collective and the individual. There is a rhythm in the performance that is managed by the artists. They are the conductor. The dancing-in is a collective experience in which everyone takes part. You see each other, take each other’s hands and form a temporary group. During part of the show, the visitor belongs to the smaller workshop group together with the tutor. The participants sit in a circle, the task is collective, everyone does the same thing, but the interpretation is individual. Dovemark (2004) showed in her study of the “new Swedish school” that the effort to create an instructional setting based on the rhetoric of responsibility, flexibility and freedom to choose, has led to less collective teaching and more individual work. It is the single student who is expected to take responsibility for individual tasks, who should be flexible and make choices. In Sloyd Circus the children did not have to choose a workshop, and very few protested. In Sloyd Circus the tutors took responsibility for helping all children carry out a craft activity – although they did have a comparably generous ratio of staff to children. Both artists and craft tutors commented on the importance of the collective appeal to create a group and a collective experience.

Sloyd Circus and school

How could the teachers who visited Sloyd Circus benefit from meeting artists and craft tutors? Sloyd Circus had an ambition to make its idea visible to a greater audience, it is stated in the goals for the project; “to develop new ways of collaborating with schools on different levels”. But little attention was given to the question of how Sloyd Circus would inspire the school. Few of the teachers interviewed said that Sloyd Circus inspired them in their everyday practice. Did Sloyd Circus look too exotic? In Sloyd Circus, the teachers met a project which was cross-cultural, and geared towards experiences, an expression for the postmodern society, a society in constant change. The visitors did not have to learn anything specific, they could just experience if they liked. In what way can a teacher relate to this? Can it have something to do with what Hargreaves (1998) writes “for most teachers, the core of every change raises the question if it is possible to adapt to teaching practice” (s. 28) my translation. An exception was a few schools which have been involved in a long-term cooperation with the handicraft movement. In those cases, the whole team of teachers came to Sloyd Circus to get inspiration for a school project. Every school has inside its boundaries representatives for
both the craft tutors and the artists. They have also, compared to three hours of Sloyd Circus, an infinite amount of time with the children. What the schools do not have is economical resources. Is that decisive?

**Gender and multicultural perspectives**

The national commission for the field of child culture states that Sloyd Circus shall have a gender and multicultural perspective. Both artists and craft tutors have consciously tried to prevent stereotyped sex roles. A great emphasis was put on this perspective while constructing the content of the performance and the workshops. The research results showed that they succeeded. In this surrounding that is shaped by the space and the staff, the children meet a totally unfamiliar culture. – What is Sloyd Circus? – What is expected from me here? The unfamiliar, the unexpected, helps the children to free themselves from their usual expectations about how a boy and a girl should behave. The older the children are, the harder it is to tempt them to get beyond their traditional roles.

When it came to the multicultural perspective, the school was the main gateway for reaching children from a different cultural background than Swedish. The tent in itself was not designed as a “temple” for Swedish sloyd, on the contrary it had taken inspiration from all over the world. When the children came with their parents on family days, we as researcher, got the impression it was mainly families having already some connection to the Handicraft movement. There are no statistics to rely on, but we have checked our impressions with staff who confirmed them. This is one of the great challenges, say those responsible for the project – to reach out to new groups, meaning not only the children with a different cultural background but also children whose families do not have a prior connection with arts and crafts. There is a great frustration with the fact that, despite the scope of the project, it did not reach new groups. One new group was reached – that of functionally handicapped children. The way the performance was set up and the collective competence of the staff gave these children a very special experience. Especially the song and dance part inspired those children often more than children from regular classes.

**Sloyd Circus pedagogy**

Is there something that can be label Sloyd Circus Pedagogy? The project was built up from five elements; the space, the cross-cultural meeting, the gender aspect, the multicultural, and the pedagogical approach. “Iscensätta” the Swedish word for staging in the theatre is a verb
that well fits this context. The learning took place in a performance. The quality of the learning depended on how the cooperation between the craft tutors and the artists evolved. Our research-based evaluation shows that this cooperation was constantly under discussion. After touring for two summers, the staff developed a way of working based on a common view of children, learning, and knowledge. When it came to children, they believed that all children can succeed given the right support. The staff showed the children great respect and loaded the performance with a positive atmosphere that made the children dare to try new crafts and new roles. When it came to learning, they believed that children learn with all their senses and at their own pace. When it came to knowledge, it was often about life. It was mostly the artists who spoke about this – theatre is about life.

It is also in this way that they skilfully manoeuvred past “treacherous underwater rocks” of gender and multicultural issues. They inspired the children to go outside their usual roles by showing them adults who dared, and by inviting them into a room that did not signal differences between people or cultures. In our observations we saw children being treated with respect as humans irrespectively of sex or ethnicity. This applies as well to children with different functional handicaps.

The space and its interior design also contributed to what can be called Sloyd Circus pedagogy. The round room gave new perspectives. The children experienced sitting close to each other in the small workshop group, on benches without tables. Every thing needed was just an arm’s length away. They were in a small group and a big group. The light was different, a daylight which changed and was filtered trough the tent canvas. Elisabeth Nordin Hultman has noted the importance of the room in the pedagogical situation. The room signals something to the visitor, with signals that are stronger than the spoken word. She refers to a study in which the children were asked what they thought a traditional classroom signals – “sit still”, whereas a room with materials and equipment, a workshop, signals – “here you can do something meaningful”.

The children got in touch with their own learning by trying new way of doing crafts and stretching their role as humans. It is seldom that a visitor has the chance to be as interactive in a performance as in Sloyd Circus. It gave the children an experience and an inspiration to do crafts, to sing and dance. The performance showed many examples of how you can create, for a child, a learning milieu that is permissive, stimulating, and aesthetic.
References


