

How to Make Peninsulas out of Islands?

An Evaluation on Cultural Education in Amsterdam for the City of Amsterdam 2002

by Michael Wimmer

The political intention to ask somebody from abroad to have a look on the manifold activities in the field of cultural education and to mirror his experiences with the representatives in the field seems to me more than remarkable.

It reflects equally the importance that the issue is given from the political point but also the estimation that going on boiling in its own soup might be of limited success when everything around is changing.

I do not know if my involvement can be of any help but anyway I would like to congratulate the politically responsables, mainly Ms Saskia Bruines, for choosing this approach. It gave me – defining my role as a “stadscommentator” - the opportunity to meet with so many experts in the fields, fully prepared to bring in and share their expertise.

The scenario of my work up to now was a series of round tables bringing together so many people from all different fields starting a common discussion where the minimum agreement was, we should go on because there are still so many things to be said and also to be negotiated.

In this respect I would like to thank not only all the participants of these round tables but also the organisers, who made possible all the arrangements in quite a short time.

I am especially grateful to Ms Annemieke Huisingh from Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst with all her hospitality who did a great job making my stay as comfortable as possible and her director Mr Gortzak who provided the necessary backing.

Equally I would like to thank Mr Peter Maissan. from Kunstweb who gave his full support in making me finding a way in the institutional jungle in your city.

I will not go in the trap to try to give a definition of what we talked about when we talked about Cultural Education. Too many different cultural and institutional backgrounds were on the tables, some more focused on social cohesion, multiculturalism, on the further development of schools and how to explore the creativity of young people, others on marketing strategies and the question how to give access to cultural institutions and others how to involve the arts in life long learning. For many conversation partners – that is the good message – it was quite evident that cultural education is not just on doing. It is equally on reflecting what you are doing why with whom under which circumstances.

Of course first of all representatives of cultural institutions want to describe what they are doing. But during our discussions it became quite clear that without a more elaborated way of common reflection further doing will become in danger.

That seems to me a major outcome of my visit: We cannot any longer trust our good will. We have to add to our particular emphasis a way of coherent strategic planning with the goal to develop a common policy on cultural education in the city.

And that won't be an easy job.

It was in one of the last meetings when we started to compare the situation in Amsterdam and in Rotterdam (and my suspicion is that there is a lot of competition around) when the estimation came up that there would be a specific attitude of the Amsterdam citizen. It was common sense that every true Amsterdam citizen would try to establish his or her own island.

This typical attitude is up to now also characterising many institutions in the field that are involved in their own problems in such a way that they are blind for those that are suffering next door with quite the same sort of problems. That is the reason why I gave my remarks that I am going to share with you the title "How to make peninsulas out of islands?"

Questioning this typical Amsterdam attitude I would like to give you just two remarks for further thinking:

The first is concerning the composition of the Amsterdam population. I think it was at the beginning of the 90th that it was declared also officially the Dutch population to be "multicultural". And all of you know that in the last 30 years there was a considerable change also in the Amsterdam's population bringing in newcomers with more than hundred different national and often also cultural backgrounds. What does that mean in terms of "a" typical Amsterdam's attitude? Is it one of the tasks of integration policy to make islanders out of all the people from abroad? Or can this challenge – and it is a considerable challenge for a traditional society – be taken as a chance for the redefinition of the relationships not only between the old and the new members of your society but also between the traditional islanders themselves?

The second question is more related to institutional aspects. There is a lot of evidence, that in more or less all modern societies traditional institutions come in danger to be emptied out by what is happening outside of them. And of course that is also happening in Amsterdam when more and more of what we might still call "cultural education" takes place outside the traditional institutions, market driven, flexible, unpredictable, spontaneous, irritating functioning in a way of temporary cultural laboratories and therefore often much more attractive for young people.

Some of the interview-partners said quite frankly: There is a considerable crisis of institutions facing the new frames of the network-society for example Manuel Castells is describing in his book "The rise of the network society".

But many of their representatives – its again the islanders-syndrome - did not yet get it. Maybe they are simply not willing to see that they are in a sort of competition with new cultural sites, events and locations they never even thought of being new places of rather informal cultural education. How should they know how to stand this kind of un-equal competition?

When I am now going to present to you a sort of frame where I try to bring in my exciting experiences in this city you may find when doing so I am generalising a lot where you may easily find out that in detail also the opposite is true. And you will be right. What I tried to find out are just some characteristics in the field I felt important that might be worth to be further discussed and of course I will accept all your critics.

To start the discussions during the round tables I raised mainly four questions. And I will go along side your answers.

For whom we are providing cultural education activities?

The city of Amsterdam is doubtless the cultural capital of the Netherlands. Most of the also internationally highly appreciated cultural institutions are located in the inner city whereas in the outer areas there is often no cultural infrastructure at all.

I really was astonished when I became acquainted with the fact that For example in South East with its about 100 000 inhabitants (coming from more than 60 nations) there is no single cultural institution to be found. Instead of that there can be found a highly motivated cultural grassroots movement fighting against all sorts of problems. All of them have in common that they do not have any relationship with the cultural infrastructure of the inner city looking by that like as if it would loose its ground.

And when I compared the education programs of one of the big institutions and those with the young citizens from South East I was forced in my view that there is quite a gap between the claims of the cultural institutions in the city with all their emphasis to improve access for all and the cultural needs of those keeping nevertheless excluded.

Again two suspicions came up in this connection. One refers to a document of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science with the title "Learning without Constraint" where the very first sentence stated: "At the forefront of exploring education is the learner".

Reflecting on this sentence my suspicion goes in the direction that the mainstream of cultural policy still goes in the direction of empowering the (central) institutions and not so much in the direction of empowering the cultural needs of all members of society especially young people.

My second suspicion was concerning the vibrancy of what is going on culturally outside the centre. I know it is a cliché but it became quite evident for me that risk taking, innovation and therefore further development cannot be expected only by the centre but by the margins. And therefore cultural policy will have to decide where to set the priorities for the future.

It was a great help for me when one of our conversation partners gave a remarkable explanation of the present in-balanced situation by constructing a kind of "Maya Temple". With this picture he made clear that the cultural grassroots on the bottom of the temple, that grew according to the re-composition of the population in the last years considerably in Amsterdam, do not any more find a reference in the big institutions on top. The "stair cases"- as he meant – have been broken away. The results are cultural worlds more or less foreign to each other.

What we want to reach by cultural education programs?

Coming to my second question what might be the reasons for cultural education programs I have to admit that I was not only moved by the vibrant examples to make immigrants re-learn their cultural roots in the outside quarters of your city but also by some fascinating cultural education programs provided for example by the KIT Kindermuseum or the Joods Historisch Museum trying to give reference to the different cultural approaches by bringing in young people as actively as possible.

I was also astonished by approaches for example of the Concertgebouw not just giving better access to the traditional programs for young people but also opening the house in a broader sense to give them a podium of reference and expression. And – coming from Vienna, one of the most traditional cities in this respect - I was specially impressed by one of the representatives saying: “Maybe it is not enough to open the house for new audiences. Maybe it is necessary to go outside where the people are and negotiate with them which kind of program could be appropriate for them”.

This new kind of thinking seems to me the more important when there were quite a lot of representatives around saying: “We want to reach all people” but not having a clear concept how to do it.

Of course there are also cultural institutions around simply in need to develop new audiences by providing cultural education activities in a quite traditional way hoping to get some extra money by the government without changing the profile of the institution in a more comprehensive way.

Talking about the goals and the means of cultural policy programs naturally the schools are playing an equally important role. In this respect I remember that before I came to Amsterdam I did a lot of advertisement concerning the special emphasis that is put on cultural education in Dutch schools as I have heard about.

Now it is clear that if you get a more detailed insight also some problems may occur. In this respect I am especially grateful to all the teachers and educational responsables taking part in our discussion and share with us their estimations.

Generally speaking all conversation partners agreed that cultural education in school should contribute to the comprehensive personal development of young people including to learn to express their individual creativity but also to become acquainted with the full range of artistic expression forms as part of their social and cultural life. Quite a task I would say.

In detail there seem to be quite a lot of obstacles to be successful. A lot of teachers were claiming that the last years have brought a series of assessment constraints focussing just on academic skills kicking out cultural education. A lot of teachers are feeling frustrated being acknowledged just by the fulfilment of the national assessment criteria and not equally by their efforts for example to manage the different cultural backgrounds of their students. In at least one primary school – so it was reported – the subject arts orientation was cancelled the reach the assessment criteria.

It became quite evident that the success of cultural education activities in schools up to now is in permanent danger because they are not based on structural means but on the personal standing of individual teachers. "I had a dream". These were the words of a headmaster of a primary school expressing his will even to fight traditional structures to be successful in cultural education terms. What keeps is the frustration that "Good Practise" is normally not acknowledged by the school administration? There are no incentives to be good in this respect when the principle "All should be treated equally" is overruling all personal engagement.

I have to go back one more time to the South East where I found quite productive co-operations between schools and cultural initiatives like "Matchpoint" in order to work on something like a cultural profile of schools and by that strengthening the individual efforts of the teachers by making them active participants in realising a common strategy.

It is obvious that cultural education activities are in a special way irritating the traditional frames of teaching and learning narrowed in any way by time, space and money. They in principle give way to a new "culture of learning" much more project-oriented, interdisciplinary and co-operative. This kind of "cultural transformation" won't happen by accident. Again therefore a policy is needed and it will be the priorities of educational policy that will decide in which direction schools of Amsterdam will go.

The implementation of a new culture of learning is challenging all participants, but mainly the teachers that are forced to re-think their traditional role and by that to find the necessary arguments for the administrators as well as for the parents, why a new way of teaching and learning might be more appropriate to the needs of the students and thereby more successful for becoming a full member of society than the traditional ones.

In the direction of the representatives of cultural institutions I would like to add that it might be not enough just to use teachers in an administrative way but to develop for them and with them common lobbying strategies that make clear why cultural education has to be seen as a key issue for any further school development.

When are we successful?

Coming to my third question I have to say that it was quite astonishing to recognise that this question for most of the conversation partners seemed quite new and if not more or less irrelevant. It made me feeling like a kind of ignorant not to see the importance of that was done as more or less self-evident how to practice.

It was not easy for me to make clear that more of professionalism does not automatically mean less idealism or emphasis for the subject. And of course: For an individual artist taking part in an educational program it can be the goal to explore the glance in the eyes of the young people. As a representative of an institution it might make sense to add to the description of the inspiring moments that took place during the project also some further reaching arguments why it is necessary to go in this or in another direction.

Because, at least from an institutional point of view – I tell you a secret: There are examples of good AND there are examples of not so good practice also in our field. But – if you agree - how can we learn to distinguish between both and more than that draw the necessary consequences without having developed any elaborated instruments.

My estimation is exactly because of this lack of a more sophisticated assessment strategy that have not yet been developed for the special needs of this sector it is still the number that counts. Let me be provocative for a moment: If we are not prepared to reflect on our work in a more comprehensive way what can we give the decision makers to develop a more differentiated picture?

Obviously there is a lack of professional discussion. All the discussion partners agreed in the problem, that there is no common platform to share experiences and discuss methodological issues.

That goes together with a poor research practise combining theoretical and practical approaches in the field up to now. More than that if there are at least some results by evaluating good practise these are not taken into account for further programming so they are seen as irrelevant.

The result is the unwillingness to develop comparable standards of quality that would help for common lobbying strategies. Instead of that each institution is obviously fighting with its self-developed instruments less and less appropriate for its day-to-day survival struggle.

Therefore the implementation of a knowledge centre that is providing knowledge transfer in the field by the organisation of expert discussions, distribution of common knowledge or providing further training could help a lot to professionalise the sector.

How does the political, administrative and institutional framework look like to make us successful?

In this respect I found four main fields of interest that could also be the basis for further discussion also in the working groups afterwards:

The importance of the policy field or the need of a common cultural AND educational policy in accordance with the other political and administrative levels

Looking at the cultural policy field first of all it has been taken into account that it is suffering from a considerable tension. On one hand the big cultural institutions are playing a decisive role in the competition with other European cities and abroad. Facing globalisation with all its new opportunities but also new constraints its rich cultural heritage gives Amsterdam a unique selling position other cities other cities comparable in size are envying you.

On the other hand it is obvious that it is just these cultural institutions that are loosing ground in relation with the considerable changing population of Amsterdam. More

and more the younger generation does not even know from their existence and because of that how to make use it.

One result of this tension might be that the culture of your city will break apart: One more traditional part, highly subsidised, mainly for international tourists and by the time fewer and older middle-class people from the traditional Amsterdam (the originals with the “typical” Amsterdam attitudes) and one more informal but steadily growing part, hardly subsidised, mainly out in the different outer quarters and based on a flexible and vibrant youth culture.

Another result could be to develop a new policy to make this tension productive for future development. Altogether I have the impression that those politically responsible have recognised this gap and this meeting might be a first step to find out how to bridge it.

The assignment of the field to look how to find new connections seems to be a first more concrete step. But to be successful in this way it will be equally necessary that those politically responsible are also assigning themselves to find new connections within their rows and by that way represent good practice.

I hope you can forgive me but in my country there is a popular saying, “The fish smells from the head”. Having in mind the many claims that on political and also on administrative level cultural and educational policy would not co-operate I try the suspicion, that the wall between schools and cultural institutions, that has been mentioned so many times, is just mirroring the gap that also exists between the representatives of cultural and education policy. And the question is: Why should the representatives in the field behave better than their politicians or the civil servants in charge?

And there are good reasons for that: For example in times of limited resources not to go alone but alongside common interests in the field of cultural education should improve the chances to realise political goals.

Therefore I am convinced: A closer co-operation between cultural and education policy is a necessary prerequisite to start a more strategic planning process. Without such a new political approach the field will keep weak, accidental in its activities and unprepared to make use of all the necessary synergies.

Another crucial problem seems to me the need of more transparent relations in policy making not only between culture and education but also concerning the different political and administrative levels. During my conversations the national level was not represented at all. This fact was the more astonishing to me as I was participating in an European conference a few month ago “A Must or A-Muse” dealing with cultural education mainly on national level where representatives on state level made quite remarkable announcements. That is why I can imagine that programs on state level are influencing cultural education activities in the city quite a lot.

On the other hand also the current process of decentralisation obviously causes a lot of new problems when For example some districts put some emphasis on cultural education issues and others do not. In this respect there was the wish that there

should be guidelines for the districts that give them the space for necessary manoeuvring but at the same time make sure that cultural education is not forgotten.

To give an example how unclear the co-operation between the different levels can work:

Art magnet schools were installed and funded primarily by the state, then the program was finished and they became dependent on the good will of the district authorities. And that happened while the city authorities stopped art orientation because of the constraints of the nation-wide assessment criteria.

Here I just can add: Further strategic planning a clear division of competencies has to be carried out in accordance with all political levels involved.

To come back to the example of the “Maya Temple” that is at least financially at the moment standing upside down. It will be one of the more risky tasks of the politicians in charge that there will be no success of any strategic planning if there will be no re-distribution i.e. re-allocation of the necessary resources. To bring the temple in more stable conditions again and do the necessary construction of the staircases the relations between “old rich” and the “new poor” in terms of cultural representation will have to be rethought.

One first step could be the political and thereby also financial acknowledgement of examples of good practise that are at the moment quite suffering from the principle that every initiative has to be treated equally.

For a broader access to the problem of resource-management also strategic partnerships with other social fields like urban planning and development, business settlement, science- or media-co-operation should be taken into account.

At this point I want just to add some more recommendations that you find helpful for further discussion:

- o The need of a kind of stock taking what is already happening in cultural education in the city and what are the circumstances under which these initiatives are happening.

- o The need for further research work. Otherwise there will be no basis for quality discussion in the field.

- o The need of a flexible interface providing information, contacts, experience, service and advise but not own programs that would compete with other providers.

- o The need to take into accounts the new technologies that are up to now rather neglected in the field. That is one of the reasons why cultural education programs often look quite old fashioned and not really equipped to meet the need of young people.

- o The need of further networking. The few round tables made quite clear that there is the need of a common platform where to meet, to exchange experience, plan new projects or common lobbying strategies.

o The need political advocacy. It should not be underestimated how important the role of politicians is when it comes to public debates where for example parents and other key persons are to get convinced that cultural education is important for a comprehensive development of their children.

The implementation of a “new culture” of teaching and learning in schools:

One has to say quite frankly: There will be no fruitful perspective for cultural education in school without a new culture of learning and teaching.

Obviously at the moment there is put too much emphasis on the assessment of traditional knowledge mediation that is narrowing the necessary plurality of different pedagogical approaches.

In times where beside traditional knowledge mediation core competencies like self-esteem, flexibility, employability, team-working and multiculturalism become more and more important the arts like no other means can contribute to a more comprehensive personal development.

How to give him or her the necessary support? How to give him or her more freedom to meet the individual needs of the pupils on local level For example – by project - orientation, theme - orientation where the learners with their abilities, needs and potentials are put at the forefront?

The implementation of new learning and teaching methods is changing the role of the teacher considerably. Nevertheless the personal standing of the teacher will keep important. It is mainly up to him or her to convince headmasters, colleagues, parents and of course also the students.

To improve cultural education measures will mean to support the especially engaged teachers (too) often still constrained in their roles as individual islanders in their classrooms.

On the other hand in the long run it won't be enough to let teachers “do” cultural education but also to reflect on the expected outcomes. More and more there is a need to establish quality standards also for cultural education activities by using appropriate evaluation and assessment methods.

It has to be mad clear that cultural education is not just a luxury but also an integral part of further school development and by that a central quality criterion for contemporary schooling.

This goes together with the need of strategic planning also for schools For example by developing cultural school profiles.

Speaking for a moment from an Austrian perspective concerning organisation development traditional schools are often a little bit behind the actual organisation development. Therefore I found it remarkable when representatives from the schools spoke quite clearly about the need of institutional modernisation like formulation of a

mission statement, staff development, quality development, developing partnerships, fundraising, and improving communications with parents, potential partners, educational boards, broader public etc.

Even if many conversation partners were suffering from too many changes in school during the last years it became evident that our societies are changing considerably in these days and schools will have to take that into account. One important issue is to liquidise the traditional school structures and make it more flexible to meet the needs of the learners.

In this respect co-operation with other institutions, that allows to compare, to benchmark, to find out, that the individual school is not an island but a potential partner (but at the same time also competitor), might be helpful (That could also mean that for example teachers take stages in cultural institutions to become acquainted with the cultural business outside school)

There is a need of implementing life long learning strategies for all school partners. That means for example: Also and especially teachers are forced to act as life long learners and by that represent personal models for the pupils.

Taking the new characteristics of teacher into account I found the development of the so-called CKV – teacher interesting. Obviously there is no comprehensive training approach for them up to now. Instead of that a lot happens by training on the job. And it seems to be working – sometimes better, sometimes not so good – it depends on the individual teacher to find his or her position as a multiplier where they can bring in their natural curiosity and creativity. So why not start the same procedure also for primary schools by that making teachers culturally driven learners.

Cultural institutions as learning institutions:

When I was asking, “who are the learners” most of the time pupils and students were on the forefront. But it could make sense that we also take into account that also cultural institutions can be seen as learning institutions.

It will be up to them to provide the necessary staircases for those up to now systematically excluded. But in the long run it won't be enough to put some additional staircases on the sidewalls of their buildings. Cultural education is on redefining the profile of the institution as a whole to provide what is obviously needed to give reference to what is culturally happening outside the walls.

Speaking in more institutional terms that means to improve the status of educational departments not somewhere beside but as an integral part of the operative business. They should not act as an alibi – maybe to get some extra money – but as a core instrument in fulfilling the policy of the institution.

In co-operation with schools cultural institutions should not just use teachers as providers of certain numbers of pupils but as pedagogical experts. Therefore it could be fruitful to share pedagogical experience in and outside school more systematically and by that find a basis for a more sustainable co-operation between schools and

cultural institutions (My proposal in this respect would be that educational officers join school activities more regularly).

To improve the relationship between cultural institutions in the centre and the grassroots movement I would recommend stages of educational staff members from the city out in the quarters and vice versa.

Professionalism as the necessary prerequisite for a more sustainable development:

When the development of a common cultural and educational policy seems to me the most important issue as a top down strategy the provision of professionalism in all its different aspects would be the main contribution of the field in a bottom up scenario. In an optimistic scenario both efforts will meet each other in the changing institutional frameworks of schools and cultural institutions.

Up to now most of the professionalism of the people working in the field comes by training on the job. That is why professionalism is hardly theoretically based and by that rather undefined. That leads – at least in my estimation - necessarily to a general weakness of the field.

One of the consequences is a considerable lack of research work and evaluation of good practise. Not surprising: Results of evaluation are often not taken into account by implementing more structural i.e. more sustainable measures. Equally common lobbying strategies do not exist up to now.

Conversation partners recommended the installation of a common interface organised as a knowledge centre providing a common platform to share information and experience and – together with the existing education and/or further training institutions – provide professional training for teachers, artists and other representatives of cultural institutions.