'The Design Club': Art Students Develop Resources To Support the Young Learners' Language Skills

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Abstract

The Design Club started four years ago with the application of a master-disciple learning partnership within an extracurricular book illustration activity at the Carmen Sylva Art School in Ploiesti, Romania. If the beginning was rather painful, with difficult twists in creating the Renaissance-style effective relationship between an expert teacher and the novices, the following steps brought about remarkable progress towards autonomous learning. Nowadays, the members of the Club manage orders from the educational book market and the teacher only offers online coaching.

Our paper will firstly contrast two perspectives: the art school and curricula that value individualism, isolation and a submissive student; and a new approach that highlights a broader, integrated perspective in the Facebook era where students naturally – and virtually - interact for learning, explore other types of beauty and discover connections between the verbal and the visual codes. Secondly, we will present results from the Design Club activity that relate to various educational projects in which the Art students manage to understand the communication needs of younger students and consequently develop innovative materials to sustain the quality language learning of the latter. Thirdly, we will draw conclusions on how our transdisciplinary initiative changed the students' focus, gave them confidence to pursue a career in book illustration, brought meaning to their learning and opened them to reflect on how communication and learning are stimulated on a page.

Last but not least, our paper shows how ICT allowed the members of the Club to share experiences, to promote their work and to become increasingly autonomous.

Key words: learning partnership, verbal and visual communication, autonomous learning

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a young Art teacher who came to teach in the same Art High School she had graduated from 10 years before. She was not experienced, the high school brought back insecurities from the time she was a student there, when she felt unsupported and marginalized for her tastes in "minor" arts. Yet she was committed to do something meaningful for the students, to share from her experiences as an independent illustrator. She was willing to at least try to teach them more than complying to the textbook. She wanted them to find fulfillment in their talents and not frustration. Above all, she wanted to offer them support for them to find a personal way on the art market. In the midst of her uncertainties about what kind of teacher she would like to become and the students' superficial attitude towards school and art she looked for answers in the literature, among other teachers and in talking with her classes. This is how the idea of a Design Club came into being. The Club was planned as an extracurricular activity to give some meaning to the students' scribbling, where to exercise and talk about comics, illustrations, design. The work in the club was inspired by Gardner's Art's PROPEL project and the approach to learning within the master-disciple relationship [1], the social dimension of learning [2, 3, 4], renewed cognitive structures as shaped by the extensive use of ICT [5,6]...

This is how our story started back in 2009. It was not easy at all. We got confronted with a lack of space and materials, many attacks from traditional teachers, who did not understand what we were doing and just felt threatened by a change, and, the most painful of all, no support from our school management. Yet, we kept going and we started to have success [7]. A primary teacher was the first one to support the Design Club, and then few others, mostly young teachers, joined in. Thus is how we got the first "orders" from the clients. They were for free but they brought meaning to what the Club members were doing.

After the first year, the Club put together an amazing Comics Exhibition and had two outstanding projects in collaboration with our supportive primary teacher. What came next was extraordinary. Students of all ages were following our activity on the internet, they were speaking about our club in school, asking what we were preparing next. Many more wanted to be part of the club, and we even

had to make a very serious selection of our members. The present members of the club are not only talented, but devoted, committed, motivated and hard working. We started to have out first projects with publishers and the students could learn how to negotiate for their work on the market. They gradually went deeper into understanding what the clients need so that they could better meet their requirements.

Traditional curriculum vs. new curriculum

There is a quite frequent question we can all hear from teachers today: "Is school preparing our students for real life?". When Art teachers in Romania were themselves students they were not at all encouraged to reflect on their learning. They were taught according to a strict curriculum, based on art techniques, with little (if any) relevance for contemporary art production. As for Art education and methodology no specific training was offered besides general pedagogy and a theoretical background the student teachers were supposed to reproduce in a traditional pencil and paper exam.

Art education in Romania remains old fashioned. Its curriculum is based on individualism and isolation; it is about neutral, decontextualized teaching instead of relating to the students and finding metaphors or stories to make concepts easier to grasp; it is about passing information and not really informing; it favours judging, not encouraging. It is never interested in ICT and new forms of beauty, other than the ones in the textbook. Everything else is labeled as kitsch. And yet, in the Facebook era, beauty gains new insights [8]. Open and faster communication features other approaches and definitely a new curriculum. At the Design Club, the curriculum got shaped by our questions and selections. The teacher chose not to teach content but her students. And thus our partnership started to bloom and integrate education in the Facebook Era. Students have been encouraged to use their ICT skills and their interest in interacting online.

Today's youth appreciate mostly visual information and minimum of effort, even if we like it or not. Fortunately, ICT can make our work easier. Why would we say "No"?

The curriculum of the Design Club facilitates the access of the students to exploration and discovery, makes use of technology as a tool, and places learning in a real life context. The new curriculum is presenting the world the way it is, is opening the door of self discovery and is giving to our students the choice of who they want to become. Will they know what to choose? The lack of experience is often pushing our students to choose wrongly from this endless space of information, so they really need us as advisers, or coaches, or tutors.

High school students illustrating for primary pupils

A very powerful context for learning is when students do something for other students as they are able to notice the immediate effects of their endeavour. In our case, everything started with the collaboration between the members of the club and a primary teacher. On this occasion, the high school students could see how primary pupils reacted in front of their work. If in the beginning the pupils were not very interested in the Club's activity, after a few projects together, they were curious to see our next artworks, and they began to show a huge respect for us. Our last project together was their end of term assembly, when the high school students supported the pupils with the props and the face-painting for their play. It was a chance for all of them to interact, this time as partners.

In the beginning of 2011 the Club got involved in a very challenging project initiated by UNICEF Romania. We were asked to produce some drawings that might help students at risk to express themselves in Language classes. More than 15 drawings were accepted by the editor of the UNICEF project and were distributed in the education priority areas of the project. The impact was very good and the target was attained. The Club's drawings drew attention, asked for a reaction, made students talk and relate to the visuals.

Later on, the club had the opportunity to illustrate some text books for high school juniors, in collaboration with *Art Publishing House*, Bucharest. Then, the Club started a prolific collaboration (still in progress today) with *Sigma Publishing House* (the members illustrating *Sigma*'s projects for the reception class i.e. big books on nonconventional stories and other resources, at a time when the Club's tutor had to leave and work in the UK. Nevertheless the Club survived and developed. The tutor is still *their* tutor but in a new stage of the autonomous learning progress as she only offers couching online.

This idea brings benefits for both parties, young illustrator and primary pupils, because it is a fortune for the members of the club to experiment and to improve their skills, but in the same time a privilege for young children to have inspirational books animated by someone just a few years older, with fresh memories about how it is to be a child. Who can understand better children, than children?

For the young illustrators it was an interesting opportunity to share the room with primary pupils. In this way they were compelled to find out the young pupils' honest opinion about their personal artwork and even to collaborate with them. For primary pupils it was a great lesson to see the senior students at work. They have learned to appreciate and recognize hard work and real talent, but also meet authentic role models.

Another ongoing project of the Club is to illustrate a variety of learning activities for primary education for the website www.infinit-edu.ro. They drew mascots according to the instructions given by primary students, They drew for the site slider in order to have the attention of the users according to specific events for every season. They made drawings to illustrate practical ideas for which there are no photos available - for example the Museum of the books in the classroom. Since such a place is not real but there is an image for it, primary pupils are invited to describe it verbally and then to proceed at developing it. The result? Great fun and good communication skills!

The students from the Club also made drawings of beloved characters from famous stories the children listened to. The latter were then asked to compare what they see in the image with they heard of in the story.

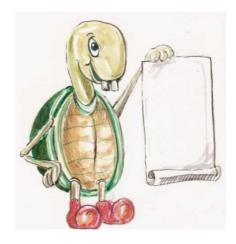In Fig. 1 there are some of these illustrations.

Fig. 1 – Artwork by the students of the Design Club for primary students' communication classes, created for www.infinit-edu.ro

The technology as a learning language

It is easy to see that students' communication with their teacher can break the barriers of traditional education and demonstrate the efficiency and many advantages of the use of technology as learning language.

Our virtual activities started in 2010 during the summer holiday, which in Romania is 3 month long, too long even from the students' perspective! Before the end of the term, we had two goals: to put together a comics magazine and to advertize our club and the magazine on the internet. So we decided to work in two teams. One was responsible with the comics magazine and the other with designing a website, a blog and a Facebook page. We had no time to finish before the end of the school year, due to all the final exams and tests, so we decided to continue during the summer holiday, on the internet. We have been on messenger, Facebook and on the phone all summer. We have even met twice in the park for fruitful brainstorming. We had the projects all ready by September, which was tremendous. Throughout the process, the social media has helped us build a strong relationship. All our work from the summer 2010 helped us to promote the Club, to continue our work outside the school and to strengthen our master-disciple partnership. Then back in 2011 when the teacher left the school to work in the UK, the internet was a powerful tool to keep us together and also a way to support students to become autonomous in their design work.

We find the internet very useful, because this virtual space can give to educators the opportunity to communicate with their students privately, in small groups or publicly to debate a subject that cannot be discussed in the classroom for lack of time or other reasons. A conversation on the internet encourages the shy student to speak up, offers access to a huge and amazing library and also the opportunity to go back and re-read the discussions.

In a time and age when adults complain about the youth's lack of motivation for school matters, teachers can nonetheless have the students' attention by using their weapons/tools, by surprising them with ICT tricks and ideas, and leave behind all the stereotypes, judgments and traditional patterns.

In our own experience, the new technology is definitely efficient and brings about numerous advantages for the learning process. There is a secret though: to plan lessons as if there is no information-based reason around.

When students are given interesting projects, and are let know what is expected from them, they can search/research for ideas and be subtly convinced to reflect about their activity. In our specific case, we treat our projects very seriously. Consequently they become authentic and part of our real world. The teacher speaks to her students from a commissioner's or client's point of view, bringing always arguments for all remarks and putting them in "real life situations".

Fig. 2 – Screen captures from our Facebook conversations

Conclusions

Nowadays, the members of the Club manage orders from the educational book market. They have built not only amazing portfolios, but self-esteem as well. If at the start just one member was wishing to become an illustrator, today the situation is reversed. All but one decided to study illustration or graphic design at the university, or to explore the field of book illustrations as students.

The current members of the Club are already students or graduated students of the National University of Arts in Bucharest; others are still students at the "Carmen Sylva" Art High School in Ploiesti, Romania. However, all members are really active in terms of art, and they had book illustration projects with Romanian editors and publishers.

Today, the club's members are working independently, the teacher only offering online coaching.

They are supporting each other and they are also sharing information and ideas about future collaborations. They became good companions, close friends, strong and confident about the future, working hard for a career in a field that did not exist in their plans before 2010.

On the other hand, their clients – young students and their teachers from primary school or low secondary school – have had a powerful visual tool, which was developed according to their needs, Our drawings supported their oral expression and motivation for learning. 80% of the students who worked with the big books we designed ranked them at the top of their favourites. The primary teachers we worked with in order to illustrate a variety of communication prompts have all been very satisfied with the results.

What matters most is that the Art students who are members of the club have learned the "craft" of book illustration and art design in a meaningful way – by addressing the needs of clients who find more context for their reading if visuals facilitate the process. The fact that clients are younger students and that the Art students design projects met the children's communicative projects is a remarkable situation of a *win-win* on the education market!

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