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PLAY!

Music Academy / Creativity Centre, 2012

An Experiment in Youth Activity



Introduction

This action was provoked by extensive communication with teenagers who are clients of Ruse's Complex for the Social Support of Children and Families or students from schools with which Equilibrium has working relationships. These relationships normally entail the provision of informal workshops in response to issues raised by teaching staff or school psychologists / pedagogical advisors.

What did the teenagers tell us?

Teenage involvement in the cultural life of the city

- Although teenagers are frequently active during cultural events, they feel they are poorly represented in Ruse's cultural life
- Why?...They participate on behalf of organizations whose agendas are driven by adult organizers. Resources are invested for the benefit of those organizations that frequently compete with one another

Clubs for teenagers

- We have been told that in the context of youth club activity, the simple enthusiast is often de-motivated
- Why?...The clubs work to a training regime because organizers aspire to public performance and / or competition standards. Clubs compete for public applause.

The implications

- Elitism, selectivity and exclusion of the majority
- A training regime and grooming of the minority who comply with the organizer's concept of talent
- Repetitive performance within a compliance culture. The ability of young participants to create and innovate is not acknowledged
- Highly predictability about the style and content of public events involving teenagers. They seldom vary
- Teenagers are used in a tokenistic fashion in community projects
- Activity for teenagers is dictated by a relatively small number of adults with a limited / unvarying repertoire
- Boredom and apathy prevail among the teenage majority



In response to these observations, EQ decided to dedicate time, space, personnel and resources to the promotion of two initiatives that run in parallel -

1. Music Academy: resources dedicated to helping teenagers who want to perform
2. Creativity Centre: resources dedicated to helping teenage activists or entrepreneurs

Where do the resources come from?

Equilibrium and key partners dedicate their organizational resources to these ventures.

What organizational resources are we talking about?

- Professional competences
- Work bases and venues for events
- Equipment
- Range of contacts
- Social influence and communication capability

The formula

After an induction period during which teenage participants are provided with the key competences for making things happen in the public domain, EQ's role should become largely *facilitative* or *supportive* in so far as this is practicable. *As far as possible, the teenagers are encouraged to take the initiative.*

Music Academy: Phase 1

During phase 1, EQ catered for 3 events under the Music Academy banner as follows:

23rd January, Max Club

2nd May, Regional History Music

19th June, Max Club

It should be noted that much of the activity around these events could easily be attributed to the other initiative - Creativity Centre. There is a natural overlap.



Additionally, the 2nd and 3rd events were linked to activity under a project undertaken by the city's European Language School, "Saints Konstantin & Kiril" sponsored by the Ministry of Education. David Bisset designed and presented a series of workshops to a group of 15 students from ninth grade that provided them with the capability to undertake activity in the community. It involved aspects of team-building, creating an organizational image, project planning and development, event planning and organization, marketing, public communication and fundraising. The group, known as the Boardroom Ninjas, created its own Facebook page as a communication portal.

Each event was planned and undertaken using a different formula derived from the following components

- Style and intensity of adult support
- Selection of young participants
- Target audience and method of publicizing the event
- Components of the performance



Event 1

Style and intensity of adult support

Student volunteers from the city's university designed and produced the poster and flyers for distribution. Publicity was handled exclusively by adults. Professional musicians collaborated with music students from the city's music and arts academy to both perform and provide musical support to those teenagers who volunteered to take to the stage. Adults chose and prepared the venue.



Selection of young participants

The participants / audience were drawn from among the young clientele of the social services complex and a number of the city's schools. Additionally, the audience was introduced to four special guests (successful teenage activists) as follows:

Anna and Preslava lead a youth group in the village of Dryanovets and their activities are mentioned in the introduction to the EQ publication "Child Participation - it's Child's Play" as an excellent example of youth led activity in the community. Annie and Pipi have also acted as animators at EQ children's camps and active participants in several events.

Kira and Chelssie: come from Vidin in West Bulgaria and they played significant roles supporting their school's participation in the British Council's "Connecting Classroom's" programme which enabled them to travel to Italy as young ambassadors for their city. Believe it or not, under David's guidance, they acted as trainers in a weekend course for school teachers under the same programme.

Target audience and method of publicizing the event

Teenage participants and audience members were notified and motivated to attend using social networking (primarily Facebook) and this was a large-scale exercise involving a series of updates and advertising techniques and contact with over 200 youngsters.

Components of the performance

With the exception of a brief presentation given by David that showcased the activities of Annie, Pipi, Chelssie and Kira, the content was entirely musical. Young performers took to the stage and their performances were interspersed among contributions from the professional musicians (reggae musician, NRG-D and friends), David and Annie.

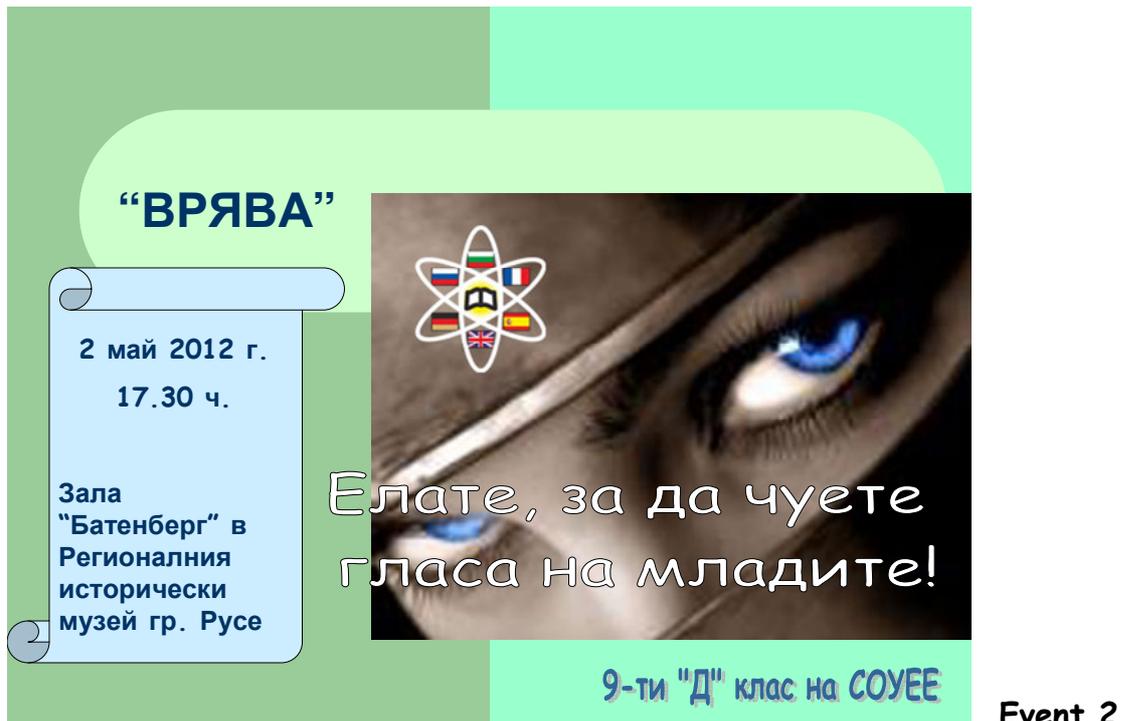
Commentary

The event succeeded in capturing the non-discriminatory spirit of the Music Academy initiative - absolutely anyone could perform if they wanted to. Teenagers took the opportunity to do this and feedback communicated via Facebook was highly positive. However, it was extensively planned and stage-managed by adults



and the young enthusiasts would have been pleased to have continued playing a passive role thereby allowing adults to continue organizing entertainment for them.

It was a positive start but we needed to find a way to propel the teenagers into the foreground and encourage them to be active in shaping the activity with EQ and partners only providing support.



“ВРЯВА”

2 май 2012 г.
17.30 ч.

Зала
“Батенберг” в
Регионалния
исторически
музей гр. Русе

Елате, за да чуете
гласа на младите!

9-ти "Д" клас на СОУЕЕ

Event 2

Style and intensity of adult support

This event involved the 15 youngsters from the School of European Languages. It was preceded by David's tutoring (described above) and extensive support from his colleague Elitsa Velikova and the school's pedagogical advisors. The poster (above) was created by Elitsa but the students provided design features in the same way as they contributed to the layout and imagery on the Facebook wall for Boardroom Ninjas. This page was constructed by David in collaboration with one of the students who has a flair for art. EQ secured the venue and our media partners, Arena Media, provided sound equipment and technical support. The cost of materials was funded through the educational project.



Selection of young participants

Originally the group was working on an event based on their reaction to a youtube video - "Kony 2012" - that went viral early in the year. However, it became clear that the group was not totally committed to this idea. It had been chosen in a random and opportunistic manner.

In response, David hosted a discussion on the reductive and limiting effect of trying to connect personal creativity to a subject in the way that advertisers do when promoting a product or service. Imagine you don't find that product / service appealing. The group was struggling badly to fit a variety of personal talents - art, music and dance, writing and verbal presentation, video editing etc - into a coherent performance. Additionally, the Kony theme involving atrocities in Uganda was dark and disturbing.

"Do you see what is happening? You chose Kony because you feel you need to do something big and serious to impress me and your teachers. That is the way things normally happen, isn't it? Do the opposite. Be true to yourselves. Why don't you just dance for the sake of dancing? Paint graffiti for the sake of painting graffiti. Those who want to talk about something should say something about themselves."

This is how "Noise" was born.

Target audience and method of publicizing the event

The performance was targeted at parents and teachers while EQ invited known supporters of Music Academy.

It was highly noteworthy that group members were very reluctant to invite classmates and friends for fear of embarrassment. This embarrassment arose from the fact that they were comparing their efforts to the performances the school population was accustomed to involving "talented" or "gifted" students.

There can be no stronger indictment of a system that causes the majority to feel alienated, excluded and unworthy.

Components of the performance

The performance celebrated diversity of styles, personal interest and modes of self-expression. It involved graffiti (recorded on youtube) and cartoons, PowerPoint presentations, music and dance. David, Elitsa and Annie joined the action having agreed to reveal their own personal interests. Those students who did not want to perform, supported their colleagues and assisted with organization.



Commentary

The event came close to the true spirit of the Music Academy initiative and the adult participation was supportive and collaborative instead of controlling.

However, there were obvious shortcomings in the group's ability to show the level of personal initiative suggested by terms like Activist or Young Entrepreneur. Before the event, they simply lacked faith in their ability to produce something worthy of applause or congratulations.



Event 3

The museum event demonstrated to the group members that they were capable of a great deal. The third event was designed on a very simple premise - now you must organize it yourselves. They were challenged to work to a similar formula but with adults playing a radically reduced role.



Commentary

The greatest risk related to a lack of group cohesion. The 9th grade class from which the group had been drawn had been formed by combining two other classes of different academic competence. Additionally, some students had been transferred from other schools.

The resultant divisions and inequalities had revealed themselves during the preparation for the previous event. There was a risk that they would widen and jeopardize this performance.

One of the students with an interest in music and the natural, youthful desire to be a rock star sought the participation of members of a well-established teenage rock band failing to realize that this meant they would come with family and young fans in tow. Recognizing that this would result in them being totally overshadowed, most of the other students lost confidence and withdrew from participation. The young rocker had effectively hijacked the event because the others did not have a similar strength of ambition or access to resources. The graffiti artist remained happy to do his own thing out in the street as he was relatively unaffected by how events would unfold inside the Max Club.

Faced with a fait accompli and recognizing that rock music had become the dominant theme, the adults worked hard behind the scenes to recruit teenage karaoke enthusiasts and to motivate the other group members so as to try to level the playing field.

Lessons learned

- Control structures that attempt to provide for democracy and fairness may create equality of opportunity - each participant has the same chance
- However, teenagers will only react "equally" to an opportunity if they have similar levels of personal motivation and are equally equipped to draw on available resources
- Those who are highly ambitious and capable of acting vigorously to promote their ambition can actually cause others to become de-motivated
- We need to ask whether its possible to properly cater for the needs of introverted and undemonstrative youngsters as part of the Music Academy Initiative



Character Traits

EQ's manual on Experiential Education contains a short section that discusses the traits of extraversion and introversion and their impact on group dynamics in the context of informal workshops. The manual is available on the EQ website (www.eq-bg.com/userfiles/Experiential_Education.pdf)

Here these traits need to be considered in a larger context in combination with something we might describe a *Social Adeptness*.

Social Adeptness

What do we mean by Social Adeptness?

Like creativity, social adeptness is not a talent. It is not linked to IQ. Rather, it is a behavioural trait or way of operating that dictates a person's capacity to react to opportunity and it is complex and multifaceted.

When provided with the type of complex proposition that precedes any of the events outlined above, a socially adept person is good at identifying and exploiting advantages and depending on his / her capacity as a leader may or may not guide others or form a team for the purpose doing this.

This leads us neatly to another significant component of the Music Academy project - working informally with teenagers using observations drawn from the world of social networking.

Here is a key observation based on this research -

It takes two to start a movement because groups don't follow the leader who initiates an action - they actually follow the first person who reacts to the leader's example. Group members, numbers 3, 4 (and so on) may observe the leader and copy his / her example but group member, number 2 played a catalytic role. Before you can form a productive group, you need to have a couple. Thus, at the creation of any movement, there is a leader / inventor and a follower / key actor. They have something in common. They are *socially adept*.

Learning lessons from social networking

As stated above, teenagers can only engage in the cultural, artistic and philanthropic activities that take place around them according to the agendas of organizations and after 'training' or some other form of induction by adults. Their



participation is subject to stronger supervision and censorship than adult participation. They find this patronizing and manipulative in an age in which the global, commercial phenomenon we might loosely describe as Youth Culture provides them with a sense of equality and solidarity with adult peers who they meet up with in the realm of Virtual Reality.

Teenagers have always been tribal and territorial. Previously they clustered around and identified themselves in terms of particular affiliations (eg an enthusiasm for punk music). They congregated in particular cafes, clubs and on street corners. Now the communication flow is more pervasive and it infiltrates home life and schooling. With electronic communication devices and access to global Youth Culture at the touch of a button, teenagers do not even have to get out of bed to link up with peers who can be anywhere on the planet. This makes it increasingly difficult for adult agendas - parenting guidance and formal schooling - to impact on the teenaged consciousness. The commercial mainstreaming of Youth Culture that renders it appealing to those aged 30-plus combined with the teenagers' natural aptitude as computer users, gives students a cultural legitimacy that sometimes appears to eclipse that of their would-be educators.

By studying this impact and drawing simple lessons from it, EQ is taking tentative steps towards changing its methods and techniques in informal education, designing and shaping workshops and bringing children together to perform different projects. The clues for improved interaction lie in the manner in which social networking impacts on teenage interaction.

Through his work in the education sector, David is now at the centre of a wide network of teenagers and communicates with them using Facebook and other networking tools.

Could the network promote the Music Academy initiative and, in so doing, help us improve our engagement with teenage clients of the social services complex?

EQ Facebook page for teenagers

An attempt to create and sustain interest in an EQ Facebook page run by teenagers for teenagers under David's supervision has not been successful. We suspect that this approach involves competing with the strong emotional investment that teenagers have in others aspects of Facebook. It is insufficient to ask teenagers to direct their attention towards a particular page. You have to join their Facebook interaction by looking for information hot-spots, areas of intense communication and attractive themes, join the commentary and then subtly alter the agendas. There is existing energetic communication and those participating are



bonded. This energy can be harnessed and redirected towards a goal that you define. It is like taking control of the steering wheel of a moving vehicle and changing course.

Early experimentation

David's first experiment involved asking 50 of his young Facebook friends to help him develop a presentation he intended to give at a public event where he would collaborate with teenaged musicians and would work with a teenage translator. He posted a message on each of their Facebook walls asking them to contribute a single PowerPoint slide containing an image and a personal statement. He gave indicators about the theme.

Initial responses were good - the youngsters seemed to like the idea. However, when the deadline for submission of slides was reached, not a single slide had been received.

Then, one evening, David broke into a stream of postings on the wall of a young friend from Vidin. Several youngsters were involved but the activity revolved around two particular girls. They were talking about rock music and one of the bands mentioned was REM. David knew that the lead singer - Michael Stipe - had been unhappy as a child. By firing off Facebook messages and posting images and messages, he succeeded in mobilizing a group of 19 teenagers. They did google and youtube searches and the information compiled was eventually shaped into the presentation that David delivered at Ruse regional history museum on June, 30th, 2011.

David had learned significant lessons.

1. His first request had been too structured and specific and had been made from a position *outside* of the group of 50 teenagers he sought to influence. His status as an authoritative adult was all too obvious.
2. Communicating casually using Facebook and designing Powerpoint slides can both be fun but David hadn't done enough to motivate the group to make the mental adjustment and move from a casual, unstructured communication platform (Facebook) to a slightly more formal procedure (PowerPoint) where they would need to work alone or form into teams clustered around computers in various bedrooms working on a particular task.
3. He provoked productive group effort (teamwork) by **entering** a group that had an existing identity - shared experience of an event earlier in the day. He adopted the prevailing style of the group and redirected the existing energy and momentum to drive his own agenda.



4. *Most importantly*, he chose someone to be his main collaborator. Dynamic, extended Facebook exchanges tend to develop around **pairs** who started the exchange. As stated earlier, it takes a couple to start and sustain a movement.

David continued to break into the Facebook exchanges of teenaged friends, studying the group dynamics and seeing if he could introduce his own agenda and dictate outcomes. He got better and better at it. There appear to be two key factors -

- a) The communication group needs a strong 'identity' or powerful reason for starting the interaction (eg a shared experience, a common enthusiasm - Justin Timberlake fans)
- b) It is vital to pick a **key collaborator** who David linked up with or to work through an existing dynamic pairing that is at the centre of the group

Working with a dynamic duo

For two successive years, Annie and Pipi have been invited to act as animators at summer camps for young clients of Ruse social services complex.

Having started their own youth club, they were accustomed to collaborating to organize activities and events. They were placed in an intermediary position between the mixed-age group of children and the team of adult supervisors led by David. Most of David's guidance and interaction with the group (and, indeed, his fellow adults) was directed via these girls. Besides their notes and checklists, the young animators were equipped with a laptop and mobile phones that preserved their contact with a wider network of friends. Additionally, they enabled the girls to remain tuned in to commercial Youth Culture despite the fact that the groups had been transported to relatively remote, rural locations. Many of the other children made similar use of mobile phones.

Not only did David want to assess the impact of the leadership of Annie and Pipi on *group cohesion* and *general motivation*, he wanted to see how they used their social networking capability to access raw material that the group could make use of.



Observations

The system: Routines, procedures and games were largely derived from the girls' own experience of summer camps or extracurricular activity at school. They drew on their favourite parts of what the adult youth leaders had done.

In their teenage eyes, this was how summer camp was *supposed to be run*.

The creative content: However, the creative content of the group activity they set in action - themes, ideas, music, dance routines, imagery - appeared as a result of their social networking capability and could often be linked to exchanges that happened only minutes before the girls engaged with the group. The laptop served as a 'honey-pot' of images, contemporary aphorisms, song lyrics, film clips, sound-bites and bullet points that the girls returned to constantly and mobile phones provided the support of their social network. Without this electronic access to a circle of friends and acquaintances the girls would have considered themselves deprived and handicapped.

In a very real way, the girls were using the energy - the buzz - provided by their social network to animate the group of children. In this way, their contribution to group cohesion and their ability to motivate the other children was actually superior to that of adult supervisors.

Annie and Pipi, with their dexterity as users of electronic gadgets provided a gateway to the World of Youth which is precisely where the children wanted to be.

Key Observation

A major component of teenage social adeptness is the ability to navigate the Internet and make constant use of a social network.

Therefore, teenagers who are *digitally deprived* are socially and educationally handicapped in today's world.

In working in the context of informal workshops with the Boardroom Ninjas and other groups of teenagers, EQ personnel could benefit from being *socially adept* like Annie and Pipi. We can't always have access to the Internet. Also, let's face it, our adult social networks and the stuff on the Internet that appeals to us is highly unlikely to create the appropriate buzz among 15-year-olds.



However, teenage interaction as shaped by the addictive use of electronic social networking does comply with certain patterns that can be simulated and employed in educational contexts. David's long-term engagement with the School of European Languages enabled him to undertake a process of trial and error while working repeatedly with a particular group.

Interactive group work with students - Main learning points

- Do not split a group into teams and assign tasks on a random basis. Look for existing affiliations and, most especially, significant experience shared in the recent past that is sustaining a stream of communication among group members.
- Do not attempt to integrate unwilling participants into the active teams at the outset. Have an *Outsiders' Group*. Wait until they choose to participate.
- Select a group member who will be your key collaborator in the team or build the team around an existing, dynamic couple. This person / pair provide progress reports and convey your tips and guidance to the team. They are likely to have been at the centre of the buzz that was animating the youngsters when they arrived at the workshop venue.
- Specify desired outcomes (products) and deadlines for their delivery but avoid defining the approach or full shape / format of the product
- Irrespective of subject, before defining this task, provoke the team to talk about the group identity - the shared affiliation / shared experience
- Encourage them to continue enjoying the buzz but to redirect some of the energy towards fulfilling the educational task. Encourage them to collaborate in the same informal manner and to apply their joint networking skills to researching and gathering resources and data
- Intermittently join the team. Your role is to motivate and applaud signs of progress. Check for signs of tension but don't worry if it appears that a few people seem hugely active while others aren't

The above points derive from the work done with the Boardroom Ninjas.

Social Adeptness among the Boardroom Ninjas

Although the same people weren't always used as team leaders, it became apparent that teenage Social Adeptness has three components -

1. **Extraversion** - the desire to be the centre of attention in a group



2. **Digital capability** - access to sophisticated electronic devices and a high level of computer literacy
3. **Strong internalization of popular culture** - communicating up-to-the-minute awareness of trends, fashions and hot news

Outsiders' Groups comprised of students who, for one reason or another, had not been involved in recent intense interaction with their classmates (eg temporary digital deprivation because of an academic assignment or participation in sport). However, as you might expect, certain students tended to remain outsiders because they lacked one or more of the characteristics that define Social Adeptness.

Was the young man whose personal desires shaped the last Music Academy event especially socially adept on the basis of the above definition? No, he wasn't but he made use of someone who was. The final event was totally dominated by socially adept heavy rock enthusiasts who defined the style of performance and the majority of the audience. The first young man communicated his desire to a very influential member of a rock band and the couple started a movement in very much the same way as Annie and Pipi animated the young participants at the children's camps.

Music Academy in the future - phase 2

The initiative will continue. The key to greater fairness is finding a way to employ the social adeptness of a small group of individuals to promote the ambitions of entire interest groups.

Annie and Pipi employed their social adeptness in the structured context of a summer camp and this helped define the outcomes. Compliance with this structure created the boundaries and provided the requisite 'discipline'.

Phase 2 of the Music Academy initiative will start with training in *leadership skills* and courses are being prepared for the autumn.

The new teenage leaders need not comply with pre-established structures and future events need not be based on aspects of the three events described above.

The guiding principle will be INCLUSIVITY and making room for minorities - those who have grown accustomed to being in the outsiders' group.

