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ENTER IN BULGARIA - DIFFERENT APPROACH AND NEW HORIZON

An interview with Jan-Willem Noom, Vice-President of ENTER

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By some chance I happened to be present at a seminar part of the programme ENTER held on 4th March 2013. The aim of the event is to modernize the educational system and to strengthen the bond between teachers and students. There I had the pleasure to meet Jan-Willem Noom - a representative of the ENTER-network. He lives in the Netherlands and travels a lot. With his many-sided interests Jan-Willem turned out to be an impressive young person. As a landscape designer and teacher trainer he manages to combine art and social skills and proves the succession in both fields. I introduce you to my multitalented friend Jan-Willem. Here are his answers to my questions:



Jan-Willem Noom

What do interactive methods of education have in common with landscape architecture and how did you decided to combine the work in the two realms?

Interesting question. Landscape architecture and education have in common that they are both bases on social processes. A landscape design is always the result of a social process (creating common ground, philosophy about the use of an area, finding main themes in use, and so on, interview techniques, collaborative working and learning). I have a great passion for both disciplines: art and social skills. In this job as a teacher trainer I am able to combine them.

What made you work in the field of classroom ice-breaking? Is your experience as a student reflected in some way?

I try to understand your question... ice breaking only is not my professional field only, just a method to activate learning groups in a learning process. I have seen that it works. It's so much more effective when people are really involved into

their learning. I have seen by myself as a student that there are different approaches of teaching. The reaction of students is completely different when you create real interaction between teacher and students.

You have been many times in Bulgaria. What is your opinion about the progress our teachers make?

Well, it's so interesting to see that some Bulgarian teachers improve their teaching skills into a more constructive and interactive approach. I am always so happy to meet Bulgarian people who are so motivated to learn and to improve themselves. That's the basement to build further on during your life.

It is not a secret that the new methods need time to be accepted and applied but do you think that Bulgarian students are mature enough having in mind their attitude towards school?

Sure, I am sure that an activating didactical approach can motivate students in an active way, so that they can be more involved in their own learning topics.

These new methods have already been applied in the Netherlands. Could you share how much time it took to be accepted and what the difficulties were?

That's difficult to describe, because nowadays you see the results of changing an educational system for more than 15 years. The Dutch educational approach is changing all the time. When we are improving something, the next change is already waiting. Our government and our school organisations really like to develop. Sometimes it's frustrating, but in the core it's an excellent philosophy, because education is never old fashioned. Agriculture is a very high developed economical business in our country, so even our education in this sector is innovative. One of our difficulties is to 'brake' our changes for a while, sometimes you need time to reflect and to let it go... do you understand? Another difficulty is to let older teachers understand that active learning is not only playing and gaming, but serious methods that you use to let people understand the topics in an active way. Active learning is not the same as ice-breakers. An ice-breaker is just a starting up method to activate people, afterwards you need more serious methods like we have done in Plovdiv (conversations, role play, writing on flip charts and having a dialogue about a topic, for example about designing topics, biology topics, and so on).

What is the relationship between you and your colleagues in the university?

My function is coordinator first year bachelor course, lecturer landscape design and professional didactics. I am a member of one of our 3 bachelorteams. Together with a team of 10 colleagues we are responsible for the quality of our curriculum and the contacts with the sector field and our students. We have one team leader and direct above there is the director. A very flat organisation, that's a bit different than in Bulgarian universities I think?

And what about your relationship with your students? I guess most of them are your age. Do you think of yourself as a part of their group of friends?

I teach mostly students in the age between 18 - 25. I am 28. Sometimes I teach part time students, they are in between the age 30 - 50. Age doesn't matter.

It's important to create an environment together where people feel themselves comfortable to learn. That's the most important. And of course that I can teach about some topics. Students and I are similar as human beings, but in my profession I am able to give them a bit more. All my colleagues, including myself, are called by first name, so there is not a very high hierarchy. Sometimes we need a bit more... but mostly it feels good as it is.

Your colleague Beate is elder and probably more experienced. How is the dialogue between you two conducted?

Good question. Beate is a great colleague from the ENTER-network and we are able to communicate on the same level. In some ways she is more experienced, in some ways (innovations, trends, ICT) I am more experienced. So we are a great team and we can learn in a collaborative way. Most important is that we really believe in ourselves, that we love to work with foreigners and that we know that we are just some strange people with some experiences which we like to share with you.... We are very good in listening, building further on each other's ideas and opinions (dialogue). We have never a discussion.

Lately a Bulgarian teacher got fired because he did a Harlem shake video with his students. What's your opinion on this? To what extent should teachers let themselves be close to the students?

It's difficult for me to have an opinion about this, because I don't know in what kind of context it has happened. If the teacher had some learning goals behind this approach, it could be a good method, but without goals (cognitive, attitude) I don't understand why he has done it.

You have a really interesting style (including your taste of shoes). Do you think it helps you when you are talking in front of larger groups of people?

Nice final question. I like to take care for myself and I like to dress myself friendly. I like to find a balance in between formal and informal. A look can be the starting point of contact, in every kind of group and culture. People all over the world should be much more open to other looks, without preconceptions. That's one of the most important goals for the next decennium. To come back at your question, I am sure that my dress helps to create real contact with my groups. This is me, this is who I am: creative, out of the box, self responsible, a bit strange, powerful, energetic and open to explore new approaches and new ways in a collaborative way, with others.

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