

**Circus** as  
**Intercultural  
Encounter**

**Guidebook**



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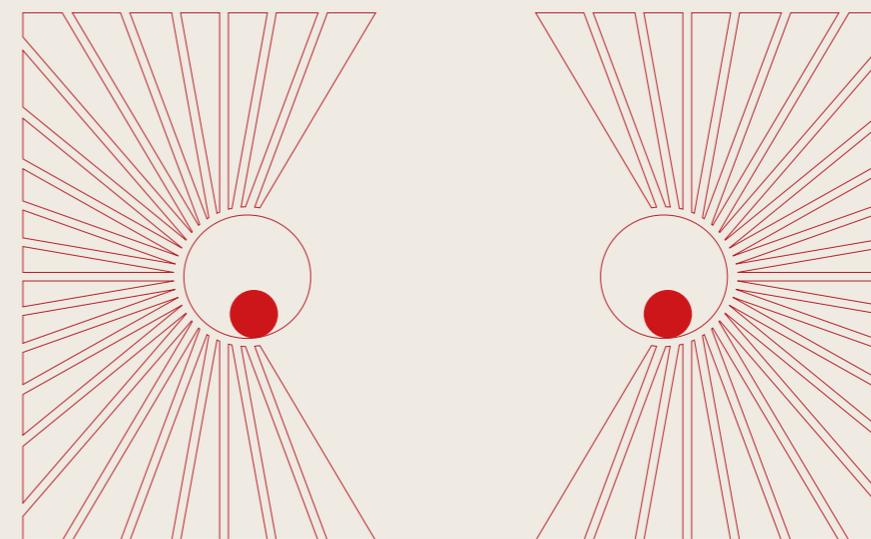
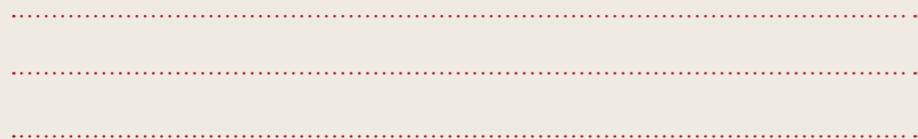
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**INTRO-  
DUCTION**



# Story

In 2015, a growing number of migrants settled in Europe. One of the public policy responses was to create funding possibilities to 'integrate' or to 'include' this newly arrived population in the local societies. Like other sectors of society, the arts and culture felt the urge to help or heal<sup>1</sup>.

In parallel with growing awareness on the situation of individuals who had experienced recent displacement, the circus community thought it could offer support via circus workshops that could be implemented through emerging funding schemes. Consequently, many organisations started facilitating circus workshops in reception centres or on their premises in partnership with local refugee support organisations.

**This raised ethical concerns among performing arts practitioners,** who started to feel as if they were offering circus activities to people who lacked everyday stability and had more basic needs such as becoming legalised in their host countries, and finding work and housing. Providing circus activities seemed disconnected from the actual concerns, which made some circus practitioners reflect and question their artistic practices.

1. Research had already been conducted on this topic in the theatre field. See notably the IETM report entitled Everybody Wants a Refugee on Stage: Conversations around Contemporary Artistic Engagement with Migration (2019) written by Daniel Gorman and Rana Yazaji [https://www.ietm.org/en/system/files/publications/ietm\\_everybody\\_wants\\_a\\_refugee\\_on\\_stage\\_06.pdf](https://www.ietm.org/en/system/files/publications/ietm_everybody_wants_a_refugee_on_stage_06.pdf)



'This left me thinking that even though it is not an either or situation, somehow putting effort into artistic activities instead of trying to make a political change is somehow... shallow... and could be taking the attention away from the real problem which is political: people are not able to even try to integrate because their status remains unclear for years.'

- Hanne Kauppinen, a trainer and field researcher from Sirkus Magenta.

A circus trainer from Circusplaneet in Belgium echoed Hanne's reflections:



'I had a feeling that I was doing something to make myself feel better and then leave. I felt like an intruder for a long time. After a long time, things changed... which there were just big stumbling blocks and a lot of

violence. And I asked myself about the impact on the children and youngsters. Because you're working in a neighbourhood with a big problem – just doing circus.'

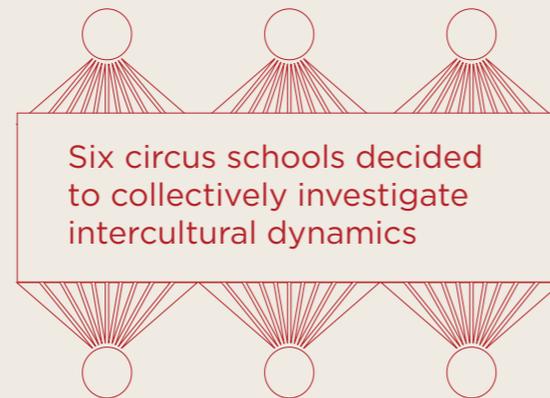
In relation to these questions, the circus trainer from Sirkus Magenta added:

'I am sure that what was done in schools with the refugee kids was important but my experiences from working with adults at the reception centres left a feeling that the activities weren't very appealing, and only a very few people ever came.'

Although the positive impacts/effects of circus practice had been widely documented in recent years,<sup>2</sup> **these trainers are highlighting more complex power dynamics at play in the encounter** between the circus organisations (the space, the trainers, the infrastructures and the circus staff) and the public/participants.

These reflections led the circus trainers and their teams **to further question their practices and engagement in intercultural work, as well as their reflective skills and awareness of the power-sharing dynamics** that shape relations among circus trainers, circus management, and the communities and participants with whom they engage.

Questions and reflections were shared among several circus organisations. Six circus schools<sup>3</sup> decided to collectively investigate intercultural dynamics and relationship building as they play out in youth and social circus settings to improve youth workers' understanding of and ability to operate in intercultural societies.



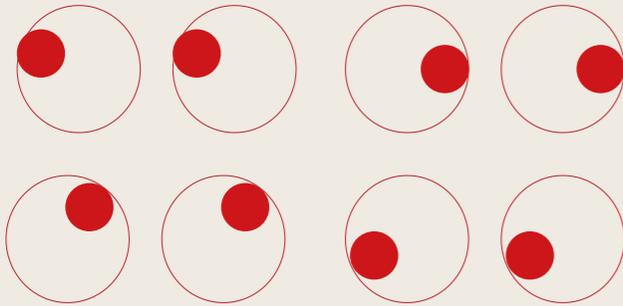
To equip the team with research and investigating tools, the circus organisations approached three academic researchers – Ilaria Bessone, Alice Feldman and Olga Lucia Sorzano – to develop a practice-led, participatory and comparative research design. This research methodology was informed by the principles of intercultural communication feeding from both the contexts of circus practice and research.

With this handbook, **we would like to warmly welcome you to a journey working towards a more intercultural perspective in teaching and facilitating circus activities.** We, the Circus as Intercultural Encounter (CIE) project research team, have made a similar journey in the last 2 years and now would like to share with you our thoughts, confusions and delights of reflecting and applying intercultural perspective in our practices.

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2. See notably Bolton (2004), Hyttinen (2011), Kekäläinen (2014), Spiegel & Choukroun (2019)  
3. Altro Circo – Italy, Sirkus Magenta – Finland, Circus Planeet – Belgium, Skala – Slovenia, Palestinian Circus School – Palestine, Zaltimbanq (Luxembourg) - together with Caravan, international youth and social circus network





# The team



## Research Coordination Team

Ilaria Bessone - Altro Circo, Italy  
Alice Feldman - University College, Ireland  
Olga Lucia Sorzano - Independent Researcher, Colombia  
Ophélie Mercier - Circusplaneet, Belgium



## Field research Team

Nadine Innocenzi and Lamine Kidiera - Altro Circo, Italy  
Hanne Kauppinen - Sirkus Magenta, Finland  
Julian Cottenie - Circusplaneet, Belgium  
Petra Tomažin - Skala Fuskabo, Slovenia  
Mohammad Abu Sakha - Palestinian Circus School, Palestine



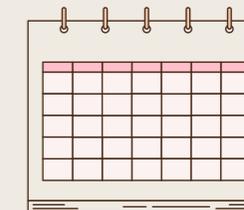
## Project Coordination

Zaltimbang - Luxembourg  
Camille Henry and Will Borrell - Caravan, international youth and social circus network - Belgium





# The project // Our journey



In order to guide you through our reflections, we will first explain the different phases of our journey which led to the following reflections.

## **September 2019**

Kick-off partner meeting in Brussels

## **September 2019 - December 2019**

Each partner organisation selected a field researcher and the specific project that would be the focus of the research.

## **December 2019 : Field researchers training**

During this meeting, the research team (field researchers and research coordinators) got to know each other and their work contexts. Alice Feldman and artist Rajinder Singh designed the research training programme.

Starting from the idea that circus trainers must have a deep sense of self reflection, awareness and sensitivity to the cultural differences that arise through performative acts, the training strategy was based on engaging the researchers' embodied knowledge, experiences and practices of circus work.

Using body-based learning techniques, we sought to create opportunities to individually and collectively explore, analyse and ultimately re-purpose intercultural skills and practices as research skills and practices.

The physical exercises and performative work, inspired by Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed methodology were accompanied by journaling, drawing, diagramming and collective discussion.

### Food for thought: Theatre of the Oppressed



Formulated by Brazilian visionary, Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed is a form of popular community-based education that uses theatre as a tool for social and political transformation. This methodology is now used in many different places around the world for social and political activism, conflict resolution, community building practices, therapy, and government.

Inspired by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Theatre of the Oppressed invites critical thinking. It is about analysing rather than accepting, questioning instead of providing answers. It is also about 'acting' rather than just talking. In Theatre of the Oppressed, the audience is not made of spectators but 'spect-actors'. Through the evocative language of theatre, everyone is invited to share their opinion of the issues at hand.

Boal, Augusto. 1993. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Theatre Communications Group.  
Boal, Augusto, and Adrian Jackson. 2021. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors - Third Edition*. Routledge. London.

We started our journey by looking at interculturality and circus practices through a researcher's lense and from many different angles. We came up with our research question that helped us navigate through our journey:

### What skills are necessary for (to facilitate/manage/foster) circus encounters in a world of diversity and complexity?

Hanne reflected on the research question highlighting other questions a trainer can ask themselves:

'How do I apply all this in my practice? What have I learned? Am I open to learning something new? Am I open to not knowing? How do I recognise knowing/not-knowing in my body: Where do I feel it?'

### January 2020 - October 2020: Fieldwork

Each field researcher designed their own social research plans according to the circus project they were researching: the specificity of the contexts, locations and participants. The fieldwork generated data on the challenges, needs and skills important for circus trainers in intercultural settings, as well as principles, practices and best practices for effective intercultural training. Data was collected using a variety of methods including video-recording circus sessions, interviews, photos and participatory arts.

Further methodological support, see Annex 'What to look and ask for' (page 00). A working document that we used to support the fieldwork process

The coronavirus pandemic interrupted our work. As each circus school adapted to it, the team adjusted its research practices. A lot of information had already been gathered in our first months of fieldwork. The second phase consisted in finalising interviews and collecting information on how COVID-19 was affecting our circus bodies and projects.

In order to compile collectively all the data collected, Alice Feldman and Marta Bustillo, the librarian from University College Dublin (UCD) organised a training programme for the team to gather the data using the Open Science Framework<sup>4</sup>.

4. The Open Science Framework - <https://www.cos.io/products/osf>

## October 2020 – October 2021: Data Analysis

Analysing the diversity of data collected meant first dividing it into conceptual elements. Each researcher identified specific characteristics and themes emerging from their data and then assigned conceptual labels to these elements to create broad categories that could be grouped together to become the initial findings. After going through this process and focusing on each context and specific field work, we met online and tried to see which themes and concepts could be combined. We moved from the individual to the collective picture and from description to explanation.

Further reading : For the data analysis, we used the book 'Research Methods: A practical Guide for the social sciences' (2010) by Bob Matthews and Ross Liz

## July 2021 - June 2022: Collective writing

As we proceeded with the analysis, we also started compile and organise the important themes and values that were emerging. After finding the commonalities, good practices and key insights from the research, we structured the information

The research team met in October 2021 in Slovenia, in December 2021 in Belgium and in April 2022 in Italy to organise the information, and write collectively this handbook.

## April 2022: Altra Risorsa - ContaminArti

Altro Circo organised the 'Altra Risorsa' conference in Fo- ligno, Italy in April 2022. Titled 'ContaminArti', the conference opened discussion about how in circus and the arts, contamination is a source of innovation, reflection and transformation.

The 'Circus as Intercultural Encounter' project was presented and in two workshops we shared our initial findings with the larger circus community. Those discussions helped us refine this handbook.



## June 2022: Pilot Training in Circus as Intercultural Encounter

From 19 to 23 June 2022, the first training programme took place at the Zaltimbanq circus school in Luxembourg. The goal was to test this handbook and the outcomes of the CIE project. Thirteen people from Palestine, Italy, Belgium, Ireland, Finland and Luxembourg took part in the training programme with Altro Circo trainers, Maria Teresa Cesaroni and Ilaria Bessone.

The training programme followed the structure of this handbook, framing the encounter as a journey with different phases and spaces (see Chapter 1: The boat). We started by building a collective boat, discussing the values and tools that would make our journey unique and exploring contents and methods to facilitate and develop 'ethical'<sup>5</sup> and 'meaningful'<sup>6</sup> encounters in the circus space (see p. 30 for a more detailed explanation of these terms).

One of the biggest added values of the training was 'the fact you are able to experiment and live the intercultural encounter while you are learning about it' (participant's feedback) and 'ideas about approaches to use for encounters, especially with language but also other barriers such as money or working with marginalised groups. It has made me think a lot more about everything about everything regarding a first (cultural) encounter, rather than assuming that circus skills and attitude alone will bring people together'. Intercultural and non-violent communication skills were also found useful in a world of diversity and complexity.

5. Ahmed, S., 2000. Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post Coloniality. London: Routledge

6. Wilson, H.F., 2013. Learning to Think Differently: Diversity Training and the 'Good Encounter.' Geoforum, 45, 73-82. Wilson, H.F., 2016. On Geography and Encounter: Bodies, Borders, and Difference. Progress in Human Geography, 1-21.



## How to use the handbook



One of the main insights we want to share is our own approximation to intercultural encounters. That is **we understand 'working towards the intercultural encounter' as a journey, as a process rather than a fixed state or a place we thrive to reach.**

In considering **this handbook as a journey** with a **multiplicity of results**, we acknowledge that we rather found more questions than answers. Our journey included circus skills, games, fun, care, critical thinking, experiences of the world and of different worlds (circus schools, universities, big cities, towns and rural areas...), creativity, shows and performances... To share some of what we learned from this research process, we have selected stories and from the fieldnotes and interviews. They might seem very personal and specific. They are. We invite you to read them as research findings and as a basis for thinking and reflecting on the relation they might have to your context and practice.

# Research methods



Each circus school selected a specific project to research and the researchers experimented with different methods:

- **Semi structured interviews** were conducted with project participants, trainers and administration staff.
- **Participating and Observing** : The researchers attended the workshops and training sessions taking place in the framework the project they were researching. They observed the trainers and the participants while taking notes of spontaneous conversations and reactions. As most of the researchers are themselves circus trainers, in some cases they were observing while training or training while observing. These two activities were simultaneous, so the researchers had to engage critically and reflect about their roles.
- **Reflexive journaling** is the process of taking notes and writing the observations and actions in the field. The researchers were invited to write detailed and thick descriptions of the workshops they were observing. **'Thick description refers to the researcher's task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context.'**<sup>7</sup> Because it involved embodied research, the researchers were urged **to note their emotions, their senses, and their feelings of comfort/discomfort** as a means of perceiving, learning, and diagnosing.
- **Creative body exercises** and performative work as research methodologies
- **Collective sharing**

Most of the researchers were involved in their field research prior to this project, either as trainers or as participants.

Therefore, they had the challenging task to 'describe routine activities in ways that renew perception' and try to 'problematize taken-for-granted beliefs and question everyday activities.'<sup>8</sup>

This reflexive journaling was an important aspect of the data collection in this project. Reflectivity - including themselves (as researchers) in the data collection enabled the 'capturing [their] own reactions, doubts, potential prejudices, frustrations and interpretations of the scene'.<sup>9</sup>



Training in body exercises and performative work as research method

Field researchers' training

Dublin, December 2019

7. Ponterotto, Joseph. 2015. 'Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept Thick Description'. The Qualitative Report, January.p.543

8. Tracy, Sarah J. 2013. 'Fieldwork and Fieldplay Negotiating Access and Exploring the Scene'. In Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact, First Edition. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.p.117

9. Ibid. p.120

# Practice-led research

'Practice-led research' (or 'research-led practice') broadly refers to producing knowledge from creative practices: understanding artistic and creative processes as valuable ways of producing knowledge.

# Research-led practice

Based on the work of Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean<sup>9</sup>, practice-led research aims to combine the following ideas:



- '[bringing] dynamic new ways of thinking about research and new methodologies for conducting it, a raised **awareness of the different kinds of knowledge that creative practice can convey** and an illuminating body of information about the creative process'.
- 'In the humanities, theory, criticism and historical investigation have been heavily prioritised over arts practice [...] However, in the last two to three decades, **the idea that arts practice might be a form of research has been developing** ascendancy. Terms such as practice-led research have been developed by creative practitioners, partly for political purposes within higher education, research and other environments, to explain, justify and promote their activities, and to argue – as forcefully as possible in an often unreceptive environment – **that they are as important to the generation of knowledge** as more theoretically, critically or empirically based research methods.'

- '**research is a process which generates knowledge.** There is in this definition an implication that knowledge is generalisable (that is, applicable to some other process and transferable (that is, can be understood and used by others in a manner which is essentially congruent with that of the original)). It can be argued that **artworks often embody such generalisable and transferable knowledge.** However, there is also an unstated implication in this definition, or at least in most interpretations of it, that knowledge is normally verbal or numerical. Since it is clear that a sonic or visual artwork can sometimes transmit knowledge in non-verbal and non-numerical terms, **we believe that any definition of knowledge needs to acknowledge these non-verbal forms of transmission.** It also must include the idea that **knowledge is itself often unstable, ambiguous and multidimensional, can be emotionally or affectively charged,** and cannot necessarily be conveyed with the precision of a mathematical proof.'

9. Smith, Hazel, and Roger T. Dean. 2009. Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts. Edinburgh University Press

# Tool : Reflexive journaling



This handbook invites 'users' to engage in reflexive journaling, embracing differences and stepping away from

- Attempts to determine what is 'good' or 'bad'
- What is closer or distant to certain ways or forms of life
- Looking at differences as opposites.

Our aim is to understand 'difference' as the myriad of particular characteristics of any human and non-human being, or that any situation or circumstance displays or any organisation offers - as the intrinsic conditions that we all bring to every encounter.

Reflexive journaling has been a very useful tool for this research project. The researchers' multiple roles - trainers, participants and/or team members - afforded insight. **The new role of 'researcher' provided space and methods to engage with observation and reflectivity in a novel way.**

That's why, we invite users to practice 'reflexive journaling' as a way of further analysing their own practices, especially with respect to intercultural encounters.

Here are a few tips to engage with reflexive journaling. Although Sarah J. Tracy's tips are for research, because project researchers their notes can be very helpful for making professional analyses.



1. Write up field notes quickly after the participant observation and before talking about the scene with others. Create a cast of characters with a rich, multi-faceted description.
2. Use a free-flowing style, write quickly, and do not bother with close editing early on.
3. Show rather than tell.
4. Make the strange familiar and the familiar strange.
5. Write in rich detail, with lots of background, context, action, and sensory imagery.
6. Avoid clichés, evaluative labels, and lacklustre language.
7. Use dialogue and quotations to indicate direct or indirect quotations.
8. Use analytic reflections to document uncertainties, opinions, and emerging interpretations.
9. Do not let analytic reflections dictate the filter through which you will evaluate all future data. Describe first. Analyse second.
10. Conclude your notes with a 'to do/observe/ask next time' list.

Each circus practitioner has their own stories. Journaling is a way to reflect on their practice and note how they negotiate differences. This handbook presents excerpts from researchers' journals in the form of stories to help you reflect on your practice and how to negotiate differences.

# How we wrote the handbook



This handbook is the product of a collective writing process. Together we have discussed, debated, written and rewritten the structure, stories, reflections and tools.

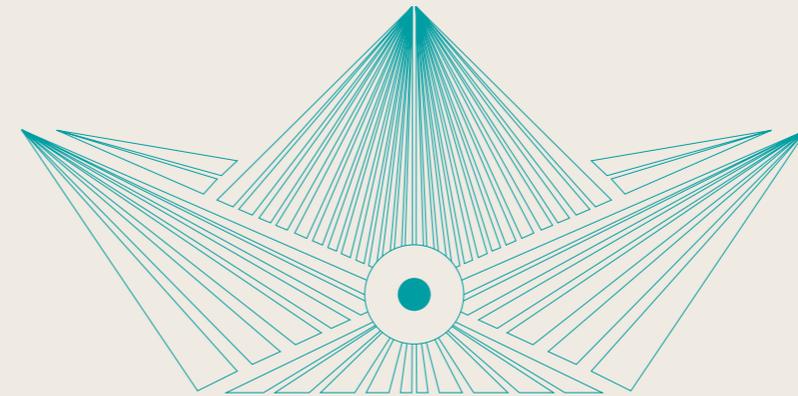
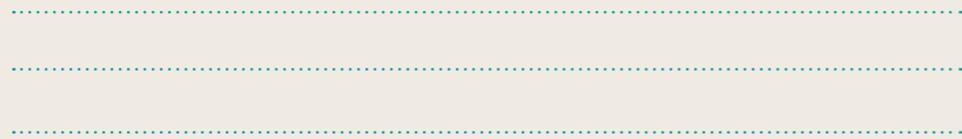
Writing in a team of nine individuals with different interests and cultural and educational backgrounds has sometimes been challenging. That said, we managed to find commonalities and points of encounters for each field research and vision.

This handbook represents our encounter – without reflecting exactly where each individual stands. It could have taken many different shapes: We could have formulated the content in other ways. The processes, reflections and knowledge emerging from it are and will remain changeable.





01



# THE BOAT

**This chapter introduces the reflections that led to creating this handbook and choosing the metaphor of a boat. This introductory chapter includes:**

- ✓ The story based on exchanges and discussions during the research team's meeting in Slovenia in October 2021
- ✓ The values that accompanied our reflections throughout the project
- ✓ Food for thought about an actor's positionality and how to think about 'intercultural encounter'
- ✓ Reflections on circus and decoloniality
- ✓ The 'Reflecting on circus and decoloniality' tool provides questions to help you consider and position yourselves on these issues.

# The story..

After collecting lots of data during fieldwork, the team analysed it in online meetings throughout 2021.



Finally, in October 2021, we were able to meet again in person in Slovenia to discuss how to organise our findings and share them in a handbook. (This is it!)



The team discussed all the various outputs and insights we wanted to share. Figuring out how to structure them was challenging.

Here are just *some* of the themes to emerge from our analysis.

readiness to feel uncertain

creating a safe space

awareness about one's values and partial perspective

love humour

self irony sensitivity excitement

observing and listening

teaching methods

conflict management

avoid taking things for granted

When the team contemplated our research question – ‘What skills are necessary for (to facilitate/manage/foster) circus encounters in a world of diversity and complexity?’; – it first thought in terms of skills. To structure the handbook, we thought about 1) emotional skills, 2) cognitive/social skills, 3) empowerment skills, 4) internal motivation and 5) creating a safe space. However basing the structure around skills did not satisfy everyone so we focused our analysis on spatial terms.



As Abu Sakha expressed during the discussion:

'It is all connected, we don't have a beginning and an end.'

Indeed, the team agreed that the different themes that we identified did not follow a linear chronological order and that they were inter-connected, and could not be

considered independently. They all strongly related to one another and we wished for the reader to be able to jump from one chapter to the other.

As we try to make sense of this circular vision for the different chapters, Hanne expressed while moving her hands around in different directions :



'It should be like an exhibition hall where you can just go in different places.'



This idea of circulation takes the form of a boat or canoe that helps us navigate the different chapters and themes to consider for an intercultural approach to the work. However, a traveling boat is a problematic image because it also symbolises what many people use to cross borders or barriers erected to prevent them from moving. Despite our awareness of the association, we kept using the boat to illustrate the fluid route towards intercultural encounters.

We continued to try to find the most appropriate format to ensure that this handbook is not perceived as a tool kit or a recipe book. Readers will not get precise answers about how to work with specific audiences or groups. This handbook proposes reflections and questions that the whole team (administration, management and trainers) at the circus school needs to address.

We pursued our discussion on the boat navigating the different chapters that could be represented as islands that we visit and then leave for another one. Iliaria proposed:



'The sea could be the space that we navigate, where we sail around emotions, social structures, embodied feelings, experiences and backgrounds.'



Building on this idea, Olga suggested:

'This boat is made of values.'

But simultaneously, she asked:

'Do we just come with these values ? Or maybe they come and go ? Are we made of these values, are they innate ? Most probably no!'

So Julian carries on with the same idea hinting that

'Probably you need to build a boat before you can start the journey or maybe when you start your journey you have them already and they become more concrete on the way.'



And Ophélie continues that maybe

'Maybe the boat is being constructed along the journey..'



And Nadine concluded:

'These values approach interculturality.'



These values have become landmarks on our journey. But they are adjustable. They are not elements that you fix once and for all – or ideals that we aspire to and once we've reached them, allow us to rest.

● ● ● In the words of Olga:

'This sea will never be calm. There will always be storms. But if we keep that in mind and stay aware of these [she shows the values on the paper], the boat can stay afloat.'

///  
The metaphor of the boat has led us to rethink our research question. And instead of looking for skills, working towards the intercultural encounter through circus practice has been conceived as a continuous journey, somehow a continuous research.

This journey is taking place within this complex world identified in the initial question. And each individual or team engages with the journey in a context that is filled with values and with power structures. You can see below the project team proposed engagement with values and how to work towards taking in consideration the power structures and one's own positionality within this specific context.



# CONSTITUTIVE PARTS OF THE BOAT

We used 'values' for the elements of our vehicle for the journey, the boat. We asked ourselves:



These values are words/ideas that came up when discussing these questions. Stimulated by the inputs gathered in field research, they were shared with the community of circus practice during the Altra Risorsa conference in April 2022.

## Solidarity, mutual help, love

- Conscious openness and sharing
- The recognition of what human beings have in common
- Attention and concrete actions respecting horizontality in human relation
- Seeing others and myself as interconnected beings who enjoy encounters
- Taking care of others
- Empathetic relations



# Interconnectivity



- The set of relations that holds together a group : what makes people feel close to others.
- Embracing diversity.
- Recognising each person's right to be different.
- The ability to recognize that differences are a form of enrichment
- The commitment to fight every form of discrimination and acknowledge privileges
- The ability to question your own point of view
- The decision and action to avoid judgement
- The commitment to create conditions allowing fairer involvement of different people
- Promoting equality and attention towards the obstacles that are preventing equality between people and the promotion of actions that tend to reduce them.

# Ecology



- Recognising the interconnection of human and other beings, nature and the environment.
- Committing to sustainable lifestyles and acknowledging the consequences of consuming planetary resources.
- Caring for all creatures and the natural environment.
- Seeing that humanity is the custodian of the planet and its diverse forms of life

**These values can serve as directions and a compass to orient ourselves** in a highly complex world.

Fairer of different people

- Promoting equality and attention towards the obstacles that are preventing equality between people and the promotion of actions that tend to reduce them.

The boat not only transports these values, but is also composed of our complex identities and the elements that shape each individual... who is also in flux. The university and circus schools that hosted our meetings have been our ports of call - where we have anchored our boat to live the encounters, learn and teach circus, do research and drink coffee.

# Thinking about positionality

Through this collective reflection, the boat filled with values became our metaphor for working towards intercultural encounters.

The boat's values or elements can be loaded or removed as we travel. That is, thinking about what makes up the boat is thinking about the positionality of the researcher or the trainer.

'The concept of positionality directly incorporates ideas of power and privilege and seeks to describe **researcher identity in terms of an insider-outsider perspective, based on the researchers' relationship to the specific research setting and community**<sup>1</sup>. Including attention to power is interesting as it relates 'to identity and intersectional positionality of researchers, based on gender, sexual orientation, ability, and multiple cultural, racial/ethnic, educational, and other forms of identity.'<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting on one's own positionality as a researcher is an important process. As we did that through our research project, it appeared very relevant to circus practice. **How do circus organisations staff reflect on their positionalities towards the groups they work with?**

1. Muhammad, Michael, Nina Wallerstein, Andrew L. Sussman, Magdalena Avila, Lorenda Belone, and Bonnie Duran. 2015. 'Reflections on Researcher Identity and Power: The Impact of Positionality on Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Processes and Outcomes'. *Critical Sociology* 41 (7-8): 1045-63.p.4
2. Ibid. p.3



# Thinking about 'intercultural encounters'

Throughout this research, the concepts of 'intercultural' and 'encounter' have been questioned as 'sensitising concepts'<sup>3</sup> rather than 'definitive' notions. During the project these concepts have been used and questioned. They are not considered as 'common references and guides' but rather as providing 'directions to look in'<sup>4</sup>.



3. Blumer, Herbert. 1954. 'What Is Wrong with Social Theory?' *American Sociological Review* 19 (1): 3-10.
4. Ibid. p.7



## Intercultural

According to the Council of Europe<sup>5</sup>, intercultural dialogue aims to 'develop a deep understanding of the diversity of worldviews and ways of doing things, in order to increase cooperation and participation (or freedom of choice), to enable personal development and transformation, and to promote tolerance and respect for the other'<sup>6</sup>

From this definition, **the project thinks of interculturality as a reflective and power-sensitive, performative and transformative notion.** Thus, intercultural practice, conceived as an active and ongoing **process of negotiation in which difference does not disappear**<sup>7</sup>, is 'beyond mere tolerance of the Other'<sup>8</sup> and cannot be separated from broader conflicts and social and political contexts.

Addressing intercultural practice in the circus is seen as a space where new experiences, capacities, relationships, opportunities and processes are generated and invited. This involves close observation to capture critical reflexive practices related to cultural differences and engaged in performative acts.

5. Council of Europe. 2008. White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue - Living together as equals with dignity. Available from: <https://www.europewatchdog.info/en/instruments/documents/intercultural-dialogue/>

6. Ibid. p.17

7. Mignolo, Walter D., and Catherine E. Walsh. 2018. On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis -. Duke University Press. Durham.

8. Ganesh, Shiv, and Prue Holmes. 2011. 'Positioning Intercultural Dialogue—Theories, Pragmatics, and an Agenda'. Journal of International and Intercultural Communication 4 (2): 81-86.



## Encounter

Ethical<sup>9</sup> and meaningful<sup>10</sup> encounters involve responsibility and generosity towards others: that is, **acknowledging the conditions of pre-existing inequalities**, and allowing for new and possibly surprising perspectives of the other, rather than reductive stereotypes. This then implies an **openness and readiness to define and redefine meaning through the encounter** and an element of surprise and delight as a 'state that grasps the potential to become different'<sup>11</sup>, and that does not need to be fixed but leaves space for discoveries along the way.

This research is aimed at intercultural circus practice as an 'ethics of attunement' that is, a practice that includes 'failure, inappropriateness, ambiguity, ambivalence, rupture and transience (...) as a space where the creative potential and political possibility of encounters are possible.'<sup>12</sup>

9. Ahmed, Sara. 2000. Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality. Transformations. London ; New York: Routledge

10. Wilson, Helen F. 2017. 'On Geography and Encounter: Bodies, Borders, and Difference'. Progress in Human Geography 41 (4): 451-71.

11. Ibid. p.2

12. Ibid. p.15

# Reflecting on circus and decoloniality

As we engaged with the concepts of interculturality and encounter, we also discussed decoloniality in our conversations. Olga Lucia Sorzano's research on the use of this concept and its limitations provided interesting insights for reflecting on how circus practice can engage with decolonial thinking and the important questions to raise.

## Decoloniality, what does it mean?

by Olga Lucia Sorzano<sup>13</sup>

Decoloniality broadly, refers to the 'independence' process of territories and peoples that were politically, economically, socially and culturally dominated by [modern] colonial powers. Processes that gave birth to the United States and Latin American nations between 1783 and 1900; the independence of various territories in the Middle East and Maghreb from the Ottoman Empire (1920 - 1945); and the independence of Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Caribbean territories between 1945 and 1970.<sup>14</sup>

Theoretically, the term 'decolonial' was coined by Latin American scholars in the 1980s, to denote a current of thought that critically engages with power dynamics inherited from colonial times. The praxis of decoloniality however, has been permanent and continuous actions all over the world, since colonial invasions led by peoples, communities and social movements all strive to defy coloniality while demanding their own ways of existence.



13. Any reference to this entire section on decoloniality must be credited to Olga Lucia Sorzano.

14. See Curiel (2009)

Decoloniality highlights the prevalence of those practices today. This perspective advocates for the need to understand and to approach the world from diverse perspectives. In other words it aims at transcending western systems of knowledge which are based on the rational, the secular, the serious, the measurable, the written text, the individual. Going beyond this perspective is also transcending the duality between 'a norm' and 'the other' and a white heterosexual male gaze. Instead decoloniality accounts for those voices and ideas that were marginalised, excluded and oppressed during colonisation times up and remain so until now (for example: spiritual, emotional, communal, embodied, shamanism, feminine, fun, humour, ancestral, Afro, Celtic, among others). The term and current of thought gained attention all over the world, resonating with different perspectives like postmodernism, post-colonial, southern theories, among others.

*Decoloniality then, accounts for a myriad of perspectives that analyse and account for the matrix of colonial power that, in global capitalism, persists under totalising forms of knowledge [same and valid for all] that reaffirm the dominator-dominated binomial [suggesting other possible arrangements outside domination, control, homogenisation, among others, for societies to function]. Different practices, voices and movements, such as black feminism, queer thought, indigenous universities, among others, are situated as transdisciplinary spaces that open up different ways of knowing and sensing the world beyond those promoted and imposed by western-centric-modern hierarchies.<sup>15</sup>*

Post-colonial and decolonial scholars around the globe, carefully investigate how the western empire, capitalism and modernity were shaped upon slavery, extraction of natural 'resources', the appropriations of peoples, lands and knowledge, and the claim that all of modern and western advancements happened because specific characteristics of the west; portraying western civilization as the present, the future and the way for humanity to thrive and to 'develop' as a civilised world (contrary to the 'barbarians', uncivilised, or 'primitive cultures').<sup>16</sup> Such differentiations, and the fact that most of the accepted and 'recognised' modern knowledge was written by male scholars (no 'common' people, nor women, nor queer, even less indigenous, black peoples; nor oral or embodied knowledge) gave rise to racial, gender, geopolitical divisions and differentiations, as well as putting scholarly and the written text at the top of knowledge production; as the accepted and valid ways of disseminating knowledge.

15. See <http://subtramas.museoreinasofia.es/es/anagrama/decolonial>

16. See for example Hall (1992), Bhabra (2007, 2014), Mignolo (2010), Connell (2007)

*Limitations or oversimplification of the term:*

Practitioners and scholars around the globe are calling attention to the overuse and simplification of the 'decolonial' term or approach, as a mere inclusion of other voices (Blanco-Borelli and Sorzano). We can also add here, a simple and unrespectful rejection of 'western', male, heterosexual voices. The challenge is to re-evaluate established forms of knowledge; to reframe them from a combined perspective, both from 'whites', 'non-whites', male, females, north, south, east, west, modern, tradition. The point is not to replace one for another (as colonialism did); and this is where interculturality becomes relevant.

*As the global north begins to finally catch up to Black, brown, Indigenous, and queer worldmaking practices, the term 'decolonial' is increasingly gaining attention inside and outside academia. While decolonial philosophies are crucial and necessary, the term is not without its limitations. There is a need to carefully reflect on the overuse of the term as a generalisation or simplification of the inclusion of marginalised voices (as postmodernism did). The recognition of the fundamental principle of decolonial thought is the need to 'unlearn', to rethink what we think we know, to reconceptualize notions and ways to produce knowledge and to accept other systems of knowledge as valid and diverse populations as citizens with full rights. The decolonial also asks for a reconceptualization of how we understand civil rights and sovereignty in their liberal Eurocentric conception as part of the dualities inherent in Western modernity.*

*Blanco-Borelli and Sorzano, 2021*

Visual artist and scholar Mirzoeff explains decoloniality in terms of 'devisualising', while calling for the possibility of another history, or rather 'herstory, transtory and/or ourstories'.

*Devisualizing means undoing the processes of classification, separation and aestheticization formed under settler colonialism as what I would now call the coloniality complex [...] The space of appearance today is the workshop for the production of devisibility, meaning the undoing of visibility by decolonization [...] devisualizing will require decolonizing past and present formations. From the past comes an understanding of 'the' state and its relation to a supposed 'state of nature' that needs to be undone.*

*Mirzoeff 2020, 13*

*The deep classifications of coloniser and so-called 'savage' (because let's not euphemize what coloniality does) create divides of space and time that cleave the understanding of life. To leave it here, if the history of racial capitalism has been the history of racialized exploitation, another history is (still) possible, despite everything. Or more exactly, herstory, transtory and/or ourstories. And that is the beginning.*

*Mirzoeff 2020, 14*

The challenge then, is to engage in a conversation, in a dialogue across voices, to create a possible future from these combined perspectives; outside established boxes and ideas of the individual and the communal, human and non-human, as separated entities. But as 'interconnected' beings and societies, to use Gurminder Bhambra's explanation. A world that has been made upon different actors. Recognising a world where these other voices have been present shaping societies (not only the west<sup>17</sup> and modern thought); voices that, despite being rejected and marginalised, are existent and active voices. Understanding the world as an exchange between interconnected individuals and communities, shaping each other. And more importantly perhaps, to believe and to act towards a possible future and transformation by 'trusting':

*Sufficient trust allows for the collaborations necessary for solving problems and co-creating a better future [...] Trust is about vulnerability, not being in the comfort zone.*

*Cohen, 2021, 1*

Decoloniality is not about colonisers and colonised; it is not about north/south; east/west. It is about breaking down those categories; to re-engage with what we mean for individual and collective existence; for the power of encounters, feelings, energies, words, texts, sound; and not only language or words.

*You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time. 'Radical' radical simply means grasping things at the root*

*Angela Davis*

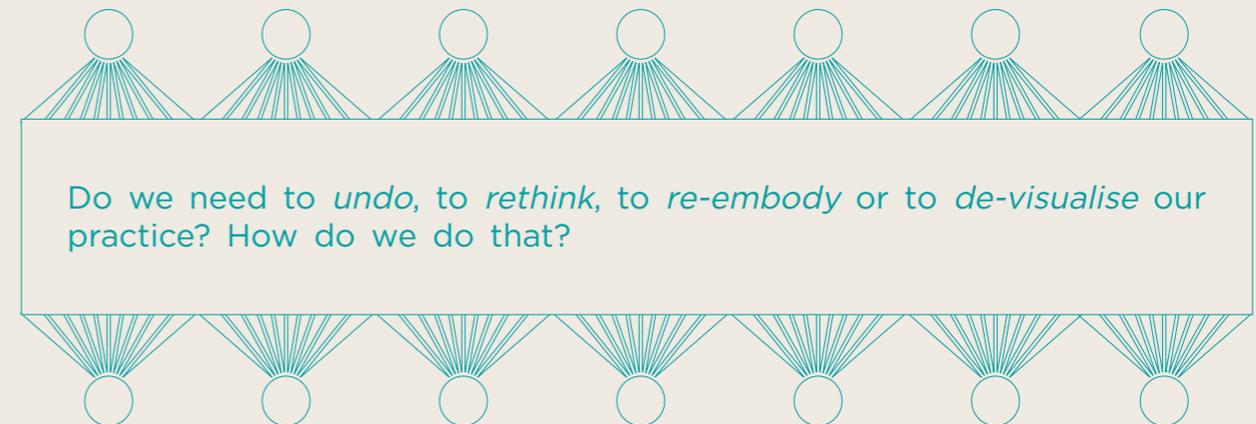
17. Muhammad, Michael, Nina Wallerstein, Andrew L. Sussman, Magdalena Avila, Lorenda Belone, and Bonnie Duran. 2015. 'Reflections on Researcher Identity and Power: The Impact of Positionality on Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Processes and Outcomes'. *Critical Sociology* 41 (7-8): 1045-63.p.4

## Tool : Reflecting on circus and decoloniality?



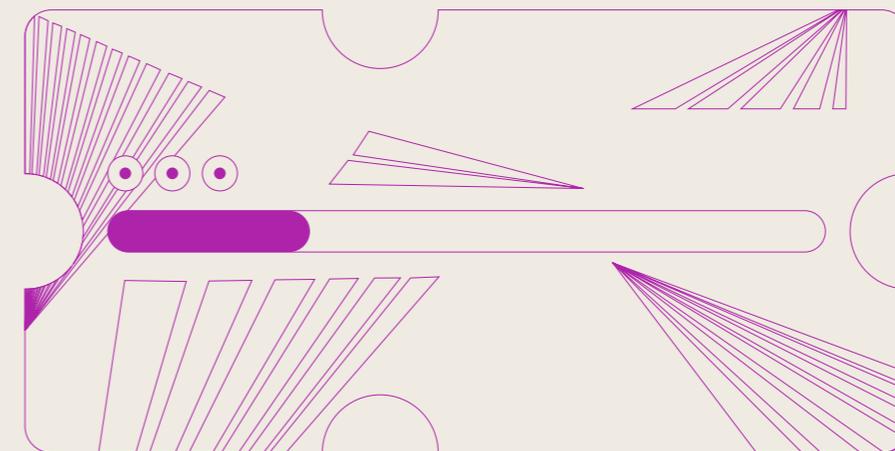
When talking about circus and decoloniality, the aim is to consider those power dynamics within circus practice; a process that can be addressed different ways:

- How are those power structures present in circus?
- How does circus challenge them?
- Does circus practice offer an alternative perspective to the rational/western/modern model? How?
- How do race, gender, disability, and other categories formed upon modern classifications persist in circus? Is there any need to challenge them, or not? Are they useful or not?
- Could circus offer a de-categorisation or reconfiguration of those categories and power structures?
- Does anything else occur to you?





02 \_\_\_\_\_



# PREPARING THE SPACE

**This chapter is about the time, space, actions and dispositions for preparing circus encounters. It is also about observing, listening to and analysing the context of the circus school and circus workshops. It is about the space outside and around them, the existing or developing communities that are in some way touched by or related to the circus organisation.**

**The chapter highlights good practices for supporting and improving not only circus trainers' work, but also organisational practices for all types of circus institutions that wish to facilitate accessibility, inclusivity and participation.**

**In this chapter you will find:**

- ✓ The peculiar story of a new circus space, opened by one of our project partners
- ✓ Moving towards sustainable circus communities: a reflection on key elements to create 'sustainable circus communities', showing the interconnections and overlapping fields of interest between circus organisations and the community and context
- ✓ A checklist of accessibility: tips and questions to help identify potential barriers that limit access to a circus organisation
- ✓ Know your context: key questions to get to know the context where circus organisations operate with an example from the field
- ✓ Suggestions of tools, activities and games that circus organisations can implement to stimulate reflections by the staff and improve their intercultural practices

# The story..

## Circus church

As a growing organisation, Circusplaneet was looking for a bigger building, a building of its own.

Its dream building had a wide floor area that rose into a high peak, just like a circus tent... and they found the church!

With the financial support from the city and many crowd-funding sympathisers, Circus Planeet was able to transform the church into a circus church.

'We wanted to get tightly integrated into the community, becoming a pillar of the society, just as the church had been in its day.'

Every change comes with adaptation and resistance

The resistance I have experienced in my time of working with Circusplaneet, came mostly from the elderly in Malem<sup>1</sup>, who have been raised with the Church and have strong childhood memories of this place. Some people who grew up in Malem and had some strong relation towards the church and the religion that goes with it... Those people felt/feel disturbed that the church building was transformed into a circus space. They don't see the positive change/the benefits that a circus school can bring to their environment. So when telling the story of the transformation, we should mention the actions that Circusplaneet has taken to create a positive atmosphere around the Circus church'

1. Malem is the name of the neighbourhood in Ghent (Belgium) where the circus school is located.

The church is located in an economically underdeveloped area with 90 per cent social housing. So we thought it was important to be there for kids and youth and contribute to the cultural life of the neighbourhood.

(M).

Besides resistance from the elderly inhabitants of Malem, the youngsters who live in the neighbourhood also needed to get used to the change. In the beginning there were some attempts to break into the church and minor vandalism.

That kind of mischief was a sign that Circus Planeet had to develop its DNA. We had to look beyond the circus borders and respond to neighbourhood needs. Circus Planeet started to experiment with new methods. It owned a caravan which has come to symbolise our circus activities.



We have used it for many events we organised related to Circus. Back in the day, we offered our caravan to the youth of Malem because they had no place to hang out in a safe space that they could decorate/shape as they wanted. There was, and still is, a need for the youngsters to have a space of their own, where they can meet and hang out. This approach that Circusplaneet took towards the youth has been very much appreciated by the neighbourhood.

Circus Planeet works with a clear strategic plan, and clear goals and actions that allow it to be very transparent and at the same time very organised. These plans are democratically made with all the people involved. Everyone is invited to take part in designing them.

It wasn't just the city administration or 'circus' people that Circusplaneet wanted to involve in the new church. They also want to ensure that the community had its say. Throughout the building renovation, locals were invited to events and exhibitions that showed what was planned for the space and gave them the opportunity to give their feedback and ideas.



Picture by: *Ilse Verstraete*



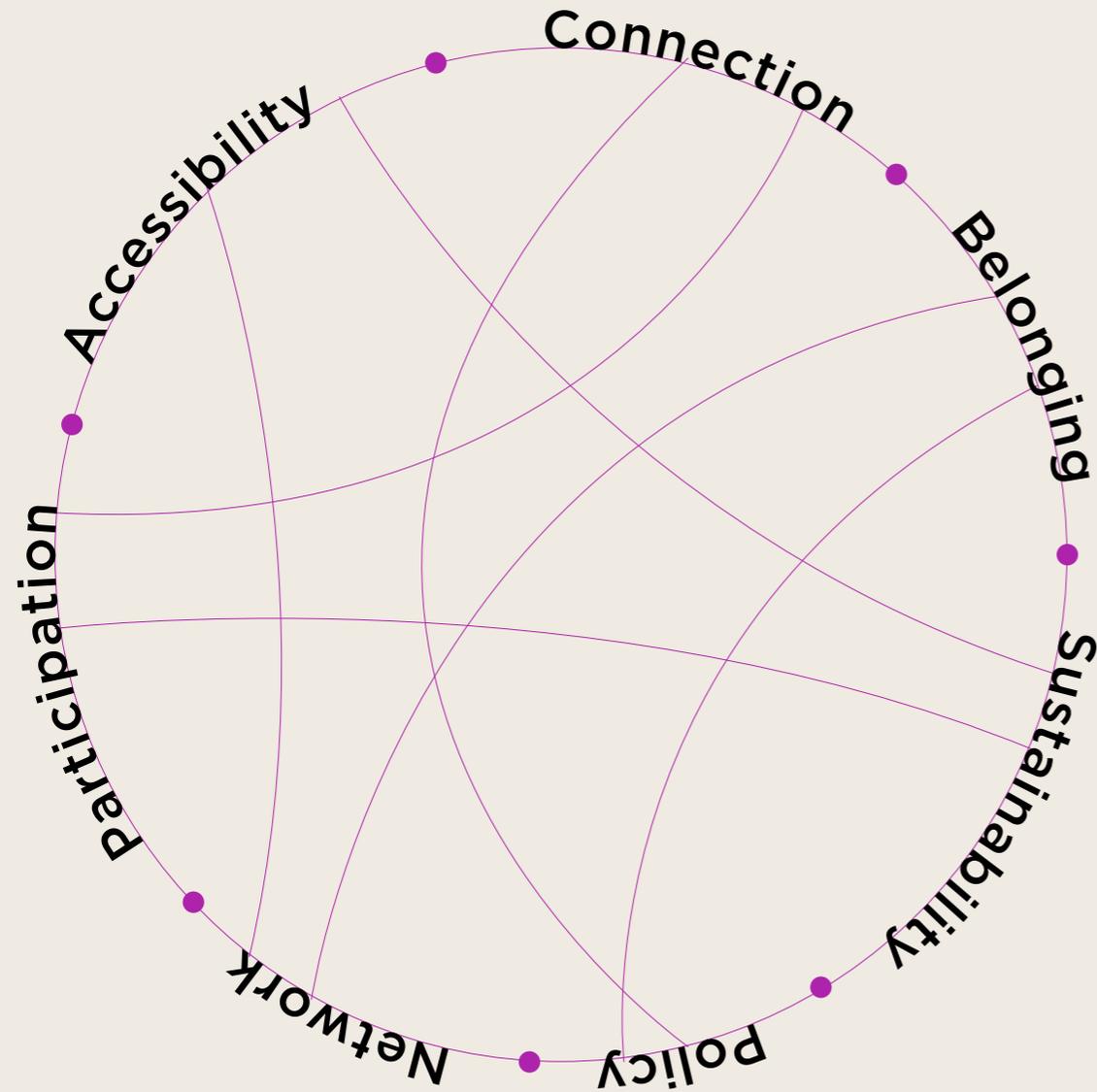
This has resulted in the 'Foyer'. The neighbourhood really needed a place where young and/or old could come together and have a chat or organise a pleasant afternoon/evening. The Foyer is part of the Circus church with fixed opening hours when anyone can come to have a chat, a warm place or a hot cup of coffee. The idea is that the neighbours' dreams can be realised in the Foyer because Circus Planeet facilitates and supports neighbours who take initiative to create a more welcoming Malem. For example, in the colder months, neighbours come together in the Foyer to make soup. They also use it as the neighbourhood distribution centre.

The community has received its new neighbours with great enthusiasm, with more and more local kids (and adults) streaming through the doors every week, both to learn and to volunteer their help. One of the handyman volunteers, who puts up plaster walls and makes odd repairs, is a retiree from the community who comes three times a week. He spent his working years as the church handyman when it was still a site for Catholic worship. His involvement and 'seal of approval' of the new use means a lot to Circusplaneet, because it demonstrates how invested the community are in what is happening there.

Circusplaneet wants the church to be an inspiring environment for local, national and international artists. By cooperating with many partners in all kinds of initiatives, they seek to make the world a better place.

The Circus church has become a symbolic place where ideas, cultures, languages and convictions intersect. A place for dialogue with the neighbourhood, the city, the region and the world - where each individual's uniqueness is valued in an atmosphere of respect and equality.

# Towards sustainable circus communities



All the elements in the diagram are key to realising a sustainable (trustworthy, efficient, effective, healthy, participative, respectful of the ecosystem and the local community) organisation/ community.

Each element has two 'dimensions':

## Organisational :

Emphasizes the structural actions/needs that a Circus school must think of.  
For quality classes, a circus school should devise and implement good structures that support the teachers and offer quality to the people who come and train.



## Relational :

Each of these elements are also related to the circus teacher and their class/group. Having these elements in the back of your head when organising a circus class, will help to improve the relation between student and teacher, and also positively impact on the wellbeing of the individual and the development of the group.



### Connection :

Organisational :

Collaborate with many partners and stakeholders around the circus school (policy-makers, potential funders, other associations, social workers, schools, artists, etc.) to strengthen your projects.

Also try to connect all the employees of the circus school. For instance, it is important for people of the administration to actively practise/see circus, and to feel the atmosphere and maintain relations with the teachers. It also is good for teachers to be kept abreast of the administrative process of a new project.

Many 'consultative bodies' are necessary - and moments to share information and experiences.



### Connection :

Relational :

Each teacher must build a trustworthy relationship with the kids they are working with. Because of that reason. On the other hand, teachers and other circus-school employees should have many opportunities to discuss major themes that come up at work.



### Belonging :

Organisational :

The school's policy has to address your interests - that's what gives direction to the course of study.

If you fully back the school's programme and actions, you're more motivated to invest your energy in it.



### Belonging :

Relational :

Practising circus together creates a bond. When playing and overcoming challenges together, young people grow together. Therefore it's important to make them feel that they belong to the group/the circus community. That shapes their identities and lives.

In addition, if they feel that they belong, it's easier to manage the group and there are fewer struggles and less resistance. How do we create this feeling of belonging? Through team-building exercises, that help the group create its own identity and consider its special rituals/peculiarities.



### Policy :

Organisational :

Each organisation needs a strong policy plan that provides a clear image of its course. It should include every aspect of the organisation.

Besides the practical side of a strong policy plan, it's also an interesting document to share with the outside world. It can help explain what your organisation stands for.

For example, it can be used as a reference when applying for subsidies or grants.



### Policy :

Relational :

It's important for teachers to consistently implement a clear set of rules.

This creates a safe space for the children. It helps them to know what is allowed and what's not. It creates a framework in which the group can experiment without crossing the limits.

For the teacher, too, it's good to know how and when to react. At times, some 'order' might be necessary to create a healthy group atmosphere and ensure the necessary discipline to train for circus correctly and safely.



### Participation :

Organisational :

In 'Belonging' we state that it's important to include the peoples' or members' interests in the policy plan. Creating a participative process from the start gives participants the chance to contribute to the circus school's organisation. Because it's important to hear as many voices as possible, that can be very time-consuming. It takes great effort to reach out to all the different subgroups, which often require different approaches. But the result can be very rewarding. As the saying goes, 'If you want to go fast, do it alone. If you want to go far, do it together.'

This expression sums up the notion of sustainability very well.

It fosters participation by giving people the chance to help build the school, making its goals, methods, missions and so forth transparent.



### Participation :

Relational :

We can implement the same rules organising the circus school and in our classes. We have to think about what barriers might exist in the way we teach, the words or methods we use, our approach to the group, etc.

We have to broaden our view to discover these barriers and then do away with them to make our classes as accessible as possible. Don't forget to look at yourself as a teacher: Be aware of your (social) position and how this might impact on or conflict with someone else.

Dialogue and reflection are two important tools to help your efforts.



### Accessibility :

Organisational :

There are a lot of things to consider when we talk about accessibility, as each organisation has a lot of known and unknown barriers. However, for a circus school to be open for everyone, it is necessary to determine these barriers by discussing the subject with as many people as possible. Searching for the barriers is an important first step. Then you have to take action to do away with them.

Such an open attitude towards all people can provide precious enrichment – in knowledge, innovation, creativity and human experience – for the organisation and everyone involved.



### Accessibility :

Relational :

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### Network :

Organisational :

As an organisation it's necessary to be linked with various 'partners' on a local, national and international level. One organisation can't be an expert in everything, this is why we should dare to rely on each other and use each other's strengths. There are so many experiences in the world, it would be a waste not to share this. By working together we can support each other in organisational growth and have a bigger impact on our surroundings.



### Network :

Relational :

As a teacher it can enriching to have a large network beyond the circus school.

There's a lot to learn about pedagogical approaches for youth.

By working with various partners we can invite groups to our classes who wouldn't find their way to us on their own. It can be difficult for a circus teacher who realises that a participant is depressed or harassed or is suffering any other serious problem. Other organisations might be able to offer good advice.



# Accessibility checklist

(Barriers to entering a circus school)

A good exercise to find out about barriers that might be limiting the accessibility and inclusivity of your circus organisation is to look at your circus activities and ask yourself: WHO IS THERE? WHO IS MISSING?

If you want the space you're working on/with to include people of different sociocultural backgrounds, examine the barriers which prevent people entering.

## Informational barriers

In many countries, the circus as a form of art, leisure, non-formal education and cultural practice is less known than, for instance, dance, theatre, sports. The images and experiences that the audience, neighbours, people who have never practised it associate with the word 'circus' might be quite diverse and different from what a circus organisation actually offers. For this reason, it is important to clarify what happens inside the circus building, as well as how circus can help develop individuals and communities.

*Do the people living around it, or the people you want to see in your circus school, know that the Circus school exists? Do they know what happens there?*



## Social barriers

You can be excluded by society for many reasons: language, religion, nationality, physical condition, sexuality, ethnicity, socioeconomic position, as well as the intersections of these and still other factors. Inequality can lead to lost confidence and foster distrust that becomes a wall between the participant and the circus.

To help promote an intercultural encounter it is not enough to put people in the same room and have them do the same exercises. The trainer is key to helping participants to feel free to communicate and express themselves openly.

*Does your circus organisation make an effort to welcome people with different habits, cultures, interests and needs? Does it embrace everyone and value the diversity of abilities and the uniqueness of each individual?*

*Look at the class participants and the space you're using. Is there something you could do to help the people feel welcome? for example, the Italian project, Mondì Possibili, allows people (friends or children of regular participants) to occasionally take part in the class. Can you do anything else to make people feel welcome before entering the space?*

## Financial barriers

As a circus school that wants to reach out to different groups in society, it is important to offer financial assistance like scholarships or diversified funding sources to people in need. Working with local partners is strongly recommended, as they open doors and offer chances to launch initiatives that a circus school can't manage (because of its own financial context).

On the other hand, it is important to make sure that these forms of support do not produce labels and inequalities (for instance, privacy might be pivotal in relation to who gets these benefits).

*How much do circus activities cost compared to other local activities? Does the ability to pay decide who is and is not present in the circus space and workshops? Are there transportation barriers? What can your organisation do to alleviate these problems?*



## Cultural barriers

As we've mentioned, we are all raised in different contexts. You have to reflect on your own organisation and the insight of participants, parents and neighbours to broaden your perspective and make your classes more accessible. It's also interesting to experiment with different forms of classes, for example, a class only for seniors or one just for women.

When preparing a circus class, try to think of the group and its specificities, interests, habits...

*Is your circus school accessible to people with different cultures? Can a person who does not speak your national language access the school and feel welcome and happy in the circus classes? What kind of religious holidays or habits do you refer to, when deciding the circus calendar, timetable, outfits of training and shows, food provided...?*

Intercultural encounters do not automatically happen. We have to actively facilitate them. Even if we all live in multicultural societies, such encounters require making an active decision and individual effort to enter into contact with people from different backgrounds. For example, facilitating contact between locals and people with migrant backgrounds requires overcoming mutual suspicions that may be unconscious. Ethnic differences are often intertwined with class differences and other forms of social inequality that we need to be aware of.

As circus teachers and organisations we have to anticipate/be proactive towards the encounter. Prepare the class, all its different facets, in such a way that the participants feel emotionally safe to encounter (social) challenges and grow individually and as a group.

*Are you interested in the people attending your classes, in their potential, in what they have to say, in finding different ways for them to express feelings, stories, ideas? What do you do in your circus classes to stimulate interest in each other, willingness to get to know other people, exchange of views, different ways of communicating, listening and expressing?*

# Know your context

To work on interculturality/intercultural encounters it is necessary to know - and to maintain a constant relation to - the project's context.

If you are planning to start a project on this theme and/ or if you are already working as a teacher in a project that involves people from different backgrounds, ask yourself which kind of people you want to add.

How could you define them?

Why is it important/necessary to include them?

How can you do that?

One example: Mondi Possibili was born in 2016 thanks to the initiative of the Zoe cultural association, which managed a cultural space in the city of Foligno, Italy, and the Circo Corsaro association (Altro Circo). Instead of working on specific categories of 'disadvantaged people', the project focuses on the Foligno's cultural community and takes a broad view of inclusion. In other words, the project aims to include people who, for different reasons, are normally excluded from the city's cultural sphere: people who cannot easily access the its cultural spaces and take part in the general debate.



# Tools and activities

Mapping the context/landscape of your circus project

## Aim:

To understand the power structures within your circus project and how these dynamics create support and resistance to the implementing your work

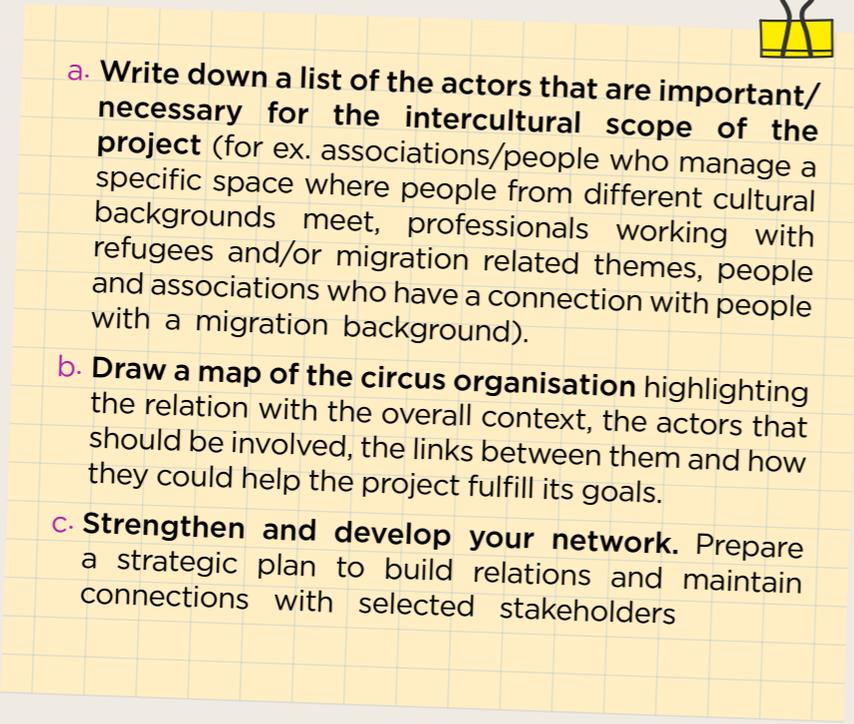
## Description and points for reflection:

1. Identify how your project started. Was it with a funding proposal? With a need expressed by a particular community? A partnership opportunity?
2. Write this idea in the middle of the paper.
3. Around it, write the names of the other actors involved in the project and/or the broader context. Were they organisations? Public institutions? Funders? Community actors? Were demographics important?
4. Where is your project located - in the centre of the community or the periphery?
5. Draw arrows in different colours to highlight support and resistance
6. Position yourself in this map and write down your positionality.

## The stakeholders' map



Every context has a specific set of actors that can be involved in the project. Their characteristics shape their ability to communicate and to also maintain the proper relation to the project's context in order to reach its goals.

- 
- a. **Write down a list of the actors that are important/necessary for the intercultural scope of the project** (for ex. associations/people who manage a specific space where people from different cultural backgrounds meet, professionals working with refugees and/or migration related themes, people and associations who have a connection with people with a migration background).
  - b. **Draw a map of the circus organisation** highlighting the relation with the overall context, the actors that should be involved, the links between them and how they could help the project fulfill its goals.
  - c. **Strengthen and develop your network.** Prepare a strategic plan to build relations and maintain connections with selected stakeholders

## The adjusted anthropologist

### Aim:

Stimulate reflections on how exciting, awkward and uncomfortable it can be to

- Meet people who take for granted how people should behave and communicate
- Be misunderstood when trying to *facilitate* communication;
- Not understand how others communicate; or
- Perhaps falsely interpret other peoples' actions and behaviours.

### Description and points for reflection:

Gather the group and introduce the exercise.

Group members who are familiar with the exercise are the 'inhabitants'. They will be told how to communicate with each other and the anthropologists. For example: 'You don't speak or understand any existing language and can only react when the anthropologist is smiling and asking you a question.'

The other group, the 'anthropologists', will be told to gather as much data as possible about the inhabitants. They need to learn things like:

- Do they all belong to the same culture?
- Do they all speak the same language?
- Do they welcome strangers?
- Do they all practice the same religion?
- Do they eat the same kind of food?
- What type of families do they have?
- Is there any form of formal education in their society?

Before the anthropologists observe and interact with the inhabitants, they get five minutes to discuss their strategy.

Afterwards, it's important to reflect about the experiences and findings of the group, both groups will have experienced different feelings, frustrations, ...

### Questions to facilitate the discussion:

What were your intentions? What guided your actions? How did you feel? How did you feel? How do you think this exercise can help trainers prepare the circus space? How can it help circus organisation structure their practices and activities?



#### Aim:

Reflect on the many intersecting identities and power structures that shape our role, opportunities, living conditions

#### Description and points for reflection:

Ask 'what are the things that shape your identity, according to you?'. There is no right or wrong answer, Answers depend on the type of group but usually, age, education, job, language and gender are named.

Write down all the answers.

Then give everyone a blank sheet and ask them to draw a small picture of themselves in the middle of the paper, with a wheel around it divided into three layers with inner and outer parts - like this.<sup>2</sup> In the first layer they should write down the answers they were given.

Then ask: 'What do you think is considered the norm for each segment? (What is the most common or the most desirable)?' For instance, the language will probably be the national language spoken by most of the local population.

Ask the group to write what they consider to be the 'norm' in the middle layer of segments.

In the outer layer ask participants to write their own characteristics.

2. See picture here: <https://vpfo.ubc.ca/files/2021/03/Intersectionality.png>

### Questions to facilitate the discussion:

How do your social identities play into facilitating or neglecting opportunities? Your social privileges? What types of privilege aren't on the wheel? How are others you work/go to school/go to circus with represented on the wheel?

**Reflect on the concept of intersectionality:** 'intersectionality is a framework that describes how our overlapping social identities relate to social structures of racism and oppression. Intersectionality merges many identity markers, including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, religion, disability, and more, to create a more truthful and complex identity. (see Kimberley Crenshaw Tedtalk)

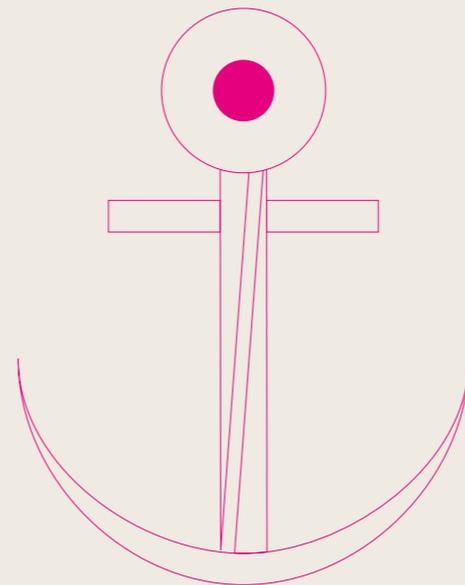
For example, a queer black woman may experience the world on the basis of her sexuality, gender, and race — a unique experience based on how those identities intersect in her life<sup>3</sup>.



3. University of British Columbia (2021) 'Intersectionality: what is it and why it matters'. Available from: <https://vpfo.ubc.ca/03/2021/intersectionality-what-is-it-and-why-it-matters/> See also Kimberley Crenshaw (2016) The urgency of intersectionality. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o>



03 \_\_\_\_\_



**ENTERING  
THE SPACE**

**This chapter is about the moment and space between preparing and beginning the actual circus workshop. It focuses on the feelings and actions of teachers and assistant trainers at the moment they enter the circus space. It provides insights and food for thought about how to get oneself and participants ready for circus encounters just before they happen.**

**In this chapter you will find:**

- ✓ A fictional story of the thoughts, reflections and actions of characters based on research interviews and fieldnotes
- ✓ Suggestions to prepare in-between spaces
- ✓ Checklists: useful questions to test the structure of the circus workshop and the safety of the circus space
- ✓ An exercise in experimental phenomenology to reflect on the partiality of our own views and positionality and cultural perspectives
- ✓ Food for thought about 'safety'

# The story..

Getting to the circus space. Trainers' self-talk and preparation routines<sup>1</sup>



Peter lives near the circus school where he works as a trainer.

'I AM A LITTLE WORRIED. LAST CLASS DIDN'T GO SO WELL, I NEED THE KIDS TO FEEL BETTER, I NEED TO BE MORE IN CONTROL, THINGS NEED TO BE SAFER...I NEED TO CHANGE SOMETHING...I'M ALSO WORRIED ABOUT THE INCREASING NUMBER OF COVID CASES. AM I PROTECTING KIDS ENOUGH? IS THE CIRCUS SAFE ENOUGH IN THE EYES OF PARENTS?'

Giulia is doing an international volunteering program. She lives in the neighbourhood where the circus school is located and walks down the main street to get there every day:

'ONE OF THE MOST PLEASANT FEELINGS: WHEN I'M WALKING DOWN THE STREETS AND KIDS WAVE, SAY HI, COME TO ME, TALKING ABOUT THE (NEXT) CLASSES...THIS CHARGES ME WITH HAPPY FEELINGS ABOUT MY WORK. I WALK INTO THE CIRCUS SPACE AND I AM HAPPY. I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO DOING MY JOB!'

Laura is the pedagogic coordinator and teacher of the circus school. She lives in a small town a few kilometres from the school. To get there, she drives through the countryside:

'I ENJOY THE DRIVE, TASTE THE CLASS, IMAGINE THE REACTIONS, THE PROGRESS OF THE KIDS, THEIR FUN. MOVING TO THE SCHOOL IS LIKE MOVING FROM EVERYDAY'S TROUBLE, FROM THE DISCUSSION I'VE JUST HAD WITH MY PARTNER, THE PAPER WORK I HAVE TO DO FOR THE BANK ...?'

## Participants

Nina woke up in a very happy mood today. It's Tuesday and she has circus right after school. Her mum walks her there with her little brother, then they go shopping and come back to pick her up. Sometimes her mum stays in the hall and has a cup of coffee with the other parents:

'I REALLY HOPE WE ARE GOING TO DO TRAPEZE AGAIN TODAY. LAST TIME I ALMOST LEARNT THAT NEW TRICK THAT SEEMED REALLY DIFFICULT...BUT MAYBE WE'LL DO JUGGLING INSTEAD...WELL I'LL ASK PETER, SOMETIMES HE LETS US TRAIN WHAT WE WANT.'

Tania is a little worried :

'IT'S SO COOL THAT I'M GOING TO SEE MY FRIENDS! I ONLY HOPE THAT RONNIE WILL BE HAPPY TODAY, EVERY TIME HE GETS UPSET LAURA GETS VERY BUSY WITH HIM AND DOESNT PAY AS MUCH ATTENTION TO US, I HOPE HE'S HAPPY TODAY SO WE CAN PLAY AND TRAIN TOGETHER THE WHOLE TIME.'

1. These fictional vignettes can be seen as fragments reflecting different aspects, thoughts and feelings related to approaching and entering the circus space. They are based on research interviews and fieldnotes.

Fatima is happy and looking forward to trying on the new hijab which she found in the shop the other day

'IT SEEMS TO BE A VERY GOOD ONE, TIGHT ENOUGH SO THAT IT DOESN'T BOTHER ME WHILE DOING ACROBATICS.'

## Scripts: actions and routines

*Trainers and assistants*

Laura arrives at the circus school, gets out of the car, opens the door, checks the time. One hour to class. She checks whether the space – the gym, changing rooms and toilets – are clean, and checks to make sure the circus props are in their place.

'WHAT IS THE PLAN FOR TODAY?'

She checks her notes and map of the space to make sure everything will be at hand when needed.

Peter is almost there. His circus class starts just after Laura's today. He is now imagining the participants' journey to the circus space and tries to put himself in their shoes:

'WHERE DO THEY COME FROM, HOW WILL THEY ARRIVE TO CLASS, CAN I GUESS SOME OF THEIR FEELINGS? WHICH SPACES WILL THEY CROSS TO COME HERE? WHAT DO THEY NEED TO ENTER THE CIRCUS?'

WHAT DO I NEED AS A TRAINER TO ENCOUNTER THEM?'

Laura is waiting for the kids to arrive. As usual, she checks on herself:

'HOW DO I FEEL?'

'DOES IT FIT WITH HOW I AM FEELING? WITH WHAT I FEEL LIKE DOING? DO I NEED TO CHANGE ANYTHING?'

She walks through the circus space and looks at it from different perspectives. She walks, runs, sits, lies down, breathes, clears her mind...She makes contact with her body and emotions, and checks the plan one last time:

'DO I HAVE IN MIND THE STRUCTURE OF CLASS, WHO DOES WHAT... COMMUNICATION (ON THE SPOT AND BEFORE) HAS PRIORITY SO WITH MY COLLEAGUE, WE CAN MAKE THINGS RUN AS SMOOTHLY AS POSSIBLE.'

While preparing the space, they make sure the mattresses are in a handy place, the music playlist ready, the headphones charged.

'WE GO THROUGH OUR CHECKLIST TO MAKE SURE THE SPACE AND PLANNED STRUCTURE ARE SAFE AND THAT IT'S "ADVENTUROUS" ENOUGH, THAT WE FEEL BOTH SURE AND CHALLENGED, NOT BORED OR ANXIOUS... THE ATMOSPHERE FOR TODAY'S CLASS REQUIRES MUSIC AND LIGHT ... I'VE GOT TO TAKE DIFFERENCES INTO CONSIDERATION (MUSIC AND LIGHT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR SOME).'

## Risks: conflicts, including the unexpected

Laura is thinking again about the youth she needs to especially care for:

'RONNIE WILL BE BACK IN CLASS TODAY. HE ATTENDS "SPECIAL" EDUCATION CLASSES BECAUSE SOME TEACHERS SAY HIS BEHAVIOUR AND SOCIAL ABILITIES AREN'T UNLIKE THE OTHER KIDS, AND INFLUENCE HOW HE INTERACTS WITH THE GROUP. LAST WEEK HIS MOTHER CALLED TO LET ME KNOW THAT HE DOESN'T WANT TO COME TO THE CIRCUS ANYMORE. HE FEELS HE'S BEEN TOLD OFF A LOT. HE HAS TROUBLE BEING WITH OTHER KIDS AND SITTING QUIETLY. HE'S "HYPERACTIVE". SHE THINKS THE MAIN PROBLEM IS THAT HE COMES TO CIRCUS WITH HIS OLDER BROTHER AND FEELS "INVADED" AND IN COMPETITION WITH HIM.'

Laura is thinking again about the boy who needs her attention. She's been thinking about how to plan the class so he spends as little time as possible near his brother.

'HE ALWAYS HAS A LOT TO SAY WHEN WE DISCUSS IN THE CIRCLE AT THE BEGINNING OF EACH CLASS, BUT GETS REALLY EXCITED AND NERVOUS WHEN HIS TURN COMES, HE FORGETS WHAT HE WANTED TO SAY...MAYBE I COULD START DIRECTLY WITH A GAME INSTEAD OF A WELCOMING CIRCLE. TRY TO APPRECIATE HIM MORE. I'LL TRY TO LEAVE PROPS AROUND THE ROOM WHICH CAN BE USED SAFELY DURING 'EMPTY' TIMES. LET'S SEE IF THINGS WORK BETTER FOR HIM TODAY.'

Peter is sitting at the table in the circus schools courtyard. He runs through his notes from the last class and the inputs he received from the various actors (the circus administration, the nearby youth centre, with whom he discussed the new participant, Jessica, to learn how to make her feel welcome). Then he goes through his notes for the next class, waiting for Giulia, his assistant. He muses about the group:

ARE THERE GOING TO BE ANY NEW KIDS? ANY SPECIFIC NEEDS LIKE TRANSLATION OR MOBILITY ISSUES? IF SO, HOW AM I SUPPORTING DIFFERENCES IN THE WORKSHOP? LAST TIME TWO NEW CHILDREN WHO DIDN'T SPEAK THE MOTHER TONGUE OF MOST OF THE GROUP. THEIR MOTHERS CAME CLASS TO TRANSLATE AND HELP. I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT WAYS TO INCLUDE AND INVOLVE THESE PARENTS SO THEY CAN SUPPORT THE WHOLE GROUP AND THEIR CHILDREN'S INCLUSION – AND ALSO HAVE SOME FUN!

It's challenging, but he likes to look for new ways to include and adapt his work to the needs of the different people attending circus workshops. Later there will be his favourite adult class:



'OUR GROUP IS MADE UP OF ADULTS WITH DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS. CONSIDERING THE DIFFERENT NEEDS OF PEOPLE IN THE CLASS, WE ALSO WELCOME PEOPLE WHO DO NOT PARTICIPATE IN REGULARLY, FOR EXAMPLE FRIENDS OF PARTICIPANTS OR THEIR CHILDREN... WHEN SOMEONE NEW COMES, I EXPLAIN WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO DO THIS.'

## The encounter: script and risk at play

Peter hears the voices of the first participants, here they are...

He welcomes them, makes sure the covid protocol is respected and opens the door of the changing room. Space can be organised in different ways. In his plan, the circus school space also includes the space outside the gym the reception, waiting room, changing room, toilets... there's a protocol saying who has access to these spaces, when, how. There are also specific places for shoes and coats, and for parents, friends, and other people to sit and chat:



'WHEN YOU ENTER THE CIRCUS HALL, YOU ARE WELCOMED AT THE RECEPTION BY THE PERSON WHO IS RESPONSIBLE. BEHIND THAT THERE IS A LITTLE FOYER WHERE KIDS CAN SIT AND DRINK WATER. BESIDES THE TABLES THERE'S ALSO A "TIME-OUT ZONE" WITH A CHILL-MATTRESS.'



Laura is now sitting with the participants in a big circle in the middle of the gym. There is some informal chatting while waiting for the last ones who arrived. She asks questions, she is interested in their living world, their **field of interests**. She listens to the private, sensitive stories which may emerge, senses if there is a need to talk about something special today, a particular story, upsetting, or happy..any hot topics? Anything that needs to emerge from the group? If needed, she changes her plans based on these last minute insights.

When everybody's there, the session begins with a half-hour long chat together in a circle. There are some new people in the class so everyone gets to tell their name and something they want to share about themselves or their wishes and goals. Then they do the game they always do at the beginning of the class, as a ritual that helps build the energy and refresh the relationship between teachers and participants, and among participants. When people are new to the space, they also do a safety walk, taking the group through the space and showing them dangerous stuff, telling them rules.



## Suggestions to prepare in-between spaces

Draw a map of the circus space: *Is everything I need at hand and safe? Is there enough room to wait, practise, take turns? Are there enough props?*

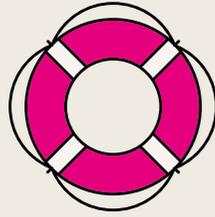
Draw a map of the space outside the circus hall/gym: *Is there space for parents to wait or to leave their cars/bikes? Is there a place where participants can wait before they enter the space? Does the circus class begin when everybody is there? How do late arrivals who join a class in progress feel? Is there a space for participants to change and store their things?*



## Checklists

Useful questions about the workshop structure to ask oneself when entering the space:

- *What do I know about the group?* \_\_\_\_\_
- *What do I know about the space and the context where I am working?* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Have I included something I feel sure/safe about, in my class plan* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Have I included something new?* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Have I included something fun?* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Have I included something difficult for everybody?* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Have I included something easy for everybody?* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Have I included something that gives space to express thoughts, reflections, feelings?* \_\_\_\_\_
- *Have I included a nice way to start and to end?* \_\_\_\_\_



## Questions about safety

The questions above are key to building a safe space, both physical and emotional. Drawing on these questions and on shared ideas about safety within a circus organisation, you might consider designing safety protocols. They include recommendations about attitudes and actions to undertake when safety criteria are not met, or in order to keep a circus space physically and emotionally safe or to monitor the safety of a space.

Protocols can concern the safety of participants, as well as that of other actors involved in circus encounters (trainers, educators, volunteers, partners, families, teachers, etc.). They change with time and need to be reassessed in relation to the context, specific relations and situations that arise, and redefined values and goals. Being 'safe' is not a universal or fixed event. It requires constant renegotiation. Other helpful but difficult questions that define safety include:

- *Am I aware of my feelings, before and during the class? Am I worried or unhappy for reasons that have nothing to do with the circus group? Is anything disturbing me? Am I breathing? Am I getting annoyed? Am I keeping an open attitude?*
- *Am I aware of the group's diversity? Of the different views, experiences and perspectives that come together?*
- *Am I aware of my power and privilege?*



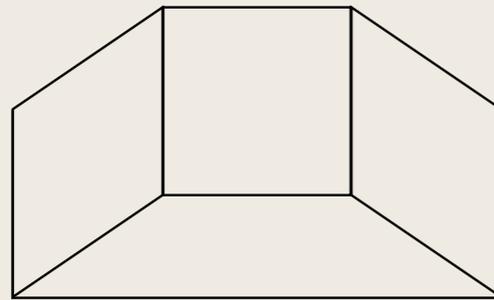
The vignettes presented at the beginning of the chapter aim to shed light on the importance of the small and big differences in how trainers and participants approach the circus space: after a nice walk or a stressful drive, a day of pleasant encounters or disturbing thoughts, pleasant time with the family or experiences of exclusion or humiliation at school. Working in a circus school there is nothing we can do to control our colleagues' and participants' lives, but we can work on our own bodily awareness, our 'inner attitude' and disposition to welcome the unknown, the unexpected and to see ourselves as part of the field we constantly help create, as a key part of the circle at the start of circus classes. Like everybody else, our emotions, thoughts, words, movements and reactions inevitably influence what happens in the group. We cannot expect full control of what happens to us, but we can work to improve awareness about our feelings and emotions, and choose whether and how to act upon them.

We can also strengthen awareness about the partiality of our own views and our positionality and cultural perspective. Below you can find a fun exercise and some inputs to help you reflect on this.

# Shifting perspectives. From naive views to adequate descriptions

The exercise in Experimental Phenomenology illustrated below is used by Don Ihde and discussed by Marianella Sclavi in her book 'Arte di ascoltare e mondi possibili' (2003). It can be used in meetings or to train circus organisation staff **to foster discussion about the partiality of views**. The tool can stimulate reflection on using the partiality and diversity of views for (circus) encounters.

- Take this picture and ask yourself/the group: *what do you see?*



'A room, or a stage'

'An ingot or a chocolate bar'

Somebody sees something full, others an empty space or object..

Then ask:

*Can everybody who sees a chocolate bar also see a room? How do you switch from one perspective to the other?* Try to provide clear instructions.

'To do that, I need to change my position in space - from above or from the inside.'

It's easier if you try to draw a little person inside, or above...

Someone will use the metaphorical power of language:

'Imagine that this is a room and you are inside it'

When we are able to see only a room, or only an ingot, we have 'naive' views. 'Naive' does not mean wrong: it implies that we are considering one of the possible options as if it was the only existing one. A more adequate description would be:

'It can be seen as an ingot, but also as a room, depending on your point of view and position in space'.

Sclavi, the author, says

'What you see depends on your point of view. In order to see your point of view, you need to change your point of view'.

That is, in order to change what you see, you need to change how you look at it: from a different spatial perspective (from below, above, from the back etc...); or to change the story you tell, using the metaphoric power of word:

'Try to see this picture as if it was a piece of chocolate'.

But there's more to it. Adequate descriptions not only use 'it can be seen as' instead of 'this is'. They also make the transformative dynamics explicit:

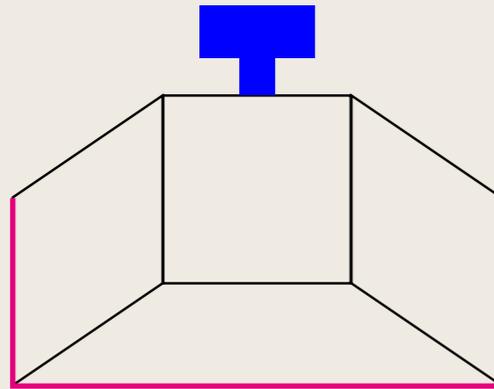
'It can be seen as a stage or a pyramid ingot, depending on the perspective adopted'.

The good news is that once the naive view is lost, it doesn't come back. Once I see something 'as also something else', I don't go back to see just one single thing in it.

However, we can shift continuously from seeing a stage to seeing an ingot, but we cannot see both at the same time: We do not 'stop being naive', we learn how to be naive 'provisionally' every time.

Now imagine, or ask the group to imagine, that somebody opens a door, looks at the picture and states: 'you drew a robot without a head!'

*How can we see this new view? And how do we see the missing head?*



Someone might suggest:

'It's a robot without head skipping a rope'

This way we acknowledge something that 'is not there' (the missing head).

When we go to a foreign country, we are puzzled like this by absences - things we take for granted which are not there. We cannot predict how people will behave. We can experience this as a stressful experience and decide never to travel again, or we can see it as an opportunity to enlarge our perspective, to see things from higher up and develop our awareness that we can always find a broader field encompassing our usual field of habits and dispositions. Infinite changes in perspective are possible!

In this example, once we move from the framework of tridimensionality (ingot or stage) to that of bidimensionality (robot without a head), we will always be aware of and question the limitedness of our views ('there might be other ways of seeing that I don't see!'). Bachtin is quoted by Sclavi (2003) as saying:

It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly' (but never exhaustively, as there will always be other cultures which will be able to see and understand even better).

There is a certain level of resistance when moving towards 'seeing the invisible'. We feel awkward, out of place, annoyed, disturbed. To welcome and remain in this discomfort zone we need awareness and training, curiosity and imagination.

The circus as a form of art in which bodily experiences are key, provides infinite possibilities for playing with diversity and uniqueness, with conflicts, misunderstandings, and the disruptions they carry that are also sources of inventiveness, creativity, fun and beauty.

However, as trainers or teamwork facilitators we need to be aware that emotions, perceptions, feelings and ideas depend on a variety of factors (including habits, power, privilege, bodily awareness and past experiences) and that participants in our circus activities will have unique views on us, our circus organisations, their peers, and so on. As members of the global community of circus practice we also need to be aware that there are very different ways of doing and teaching circus around the globe. We have to be able to suspend judgement on how things are done elsewhere. This heterogeneity of focus, goals, aesthetics, histories and people is a rich and creative resource.

## Simple difficult questions to get ready to what we're not ready for:

When entering the circus space, we may be so exhausted, angry, sad or simply mentally distracted that we don't feel any interest or curiosity or energy. When that happens, *how can we delve into a circus class? Can we ask for help? What other options are available? Can we find a moment to relax, listen to ourselves? Do we have a strategy to find motivation?*

Sometimes (many times...) things don't go as we expected and planned. *Can we leave space for surprises? Can we let go of our goals and plans for that day and let the unexpected take the lead?*

*Are we having fun? Are we interested in what we are saying, in what others are saying, in what is happening?*

*Can we stop for a moment to try to imagine how it might feel to see things from other perspectives, other stories, other bodies - to take these other possibilities seriously, respond to them? Is there any 'invisible head' (like the robot's above) that we are not seeing, and someone else is?*

## Food for thought about safety

Stories and examples in this chapter highlighted that at least three elements affect the perception that a space is safe:

- Position, power and privilege in society: the same space can be safe for some, and not for others. For instance, Leslie Kern in her book 'Feminist City' (2020) provides many examples of how intertwined power relations shape the different ways in which the same urban space can be experienced by different bodies.
- Feelings, moods, events, the experiences and encounters of the day
- Culture and habits

Considering all of this... *What is a safe space?*



A safe space is not only about the 'technical' aspects of circus (the way trapezes are hung, mattresses placed etc). Safety is also about **clarity**, making space for **taking risks** and for **mistakes**, being able to **express your feelings**. It's an ongoing process, a flexible concept which changes with time and space. It is a **shared responsibility** and **requires continuous work**.

Below are some reflections which emerged in the field researchers' discussions, that shed light on how safety is about structure as well as flexibility and openness to the unexpected, it needs constant checks, negotiations and questioning, it cannot be fixed once and for all. It is an individual and group process:

'I feel safe when I know what I am doing, where to put my things, where I should go, where I should sit, when we start and when we finish'.

'In a safe space things can be seen from different perspectives... different views and experiences are possible'.

'Safety is also about acknowledging and being aware that you cannot control everything, taking into account that there is a margin of risk, that things can go wrong'.

'Safety is about opening a space for mistakes, for being wrong'.

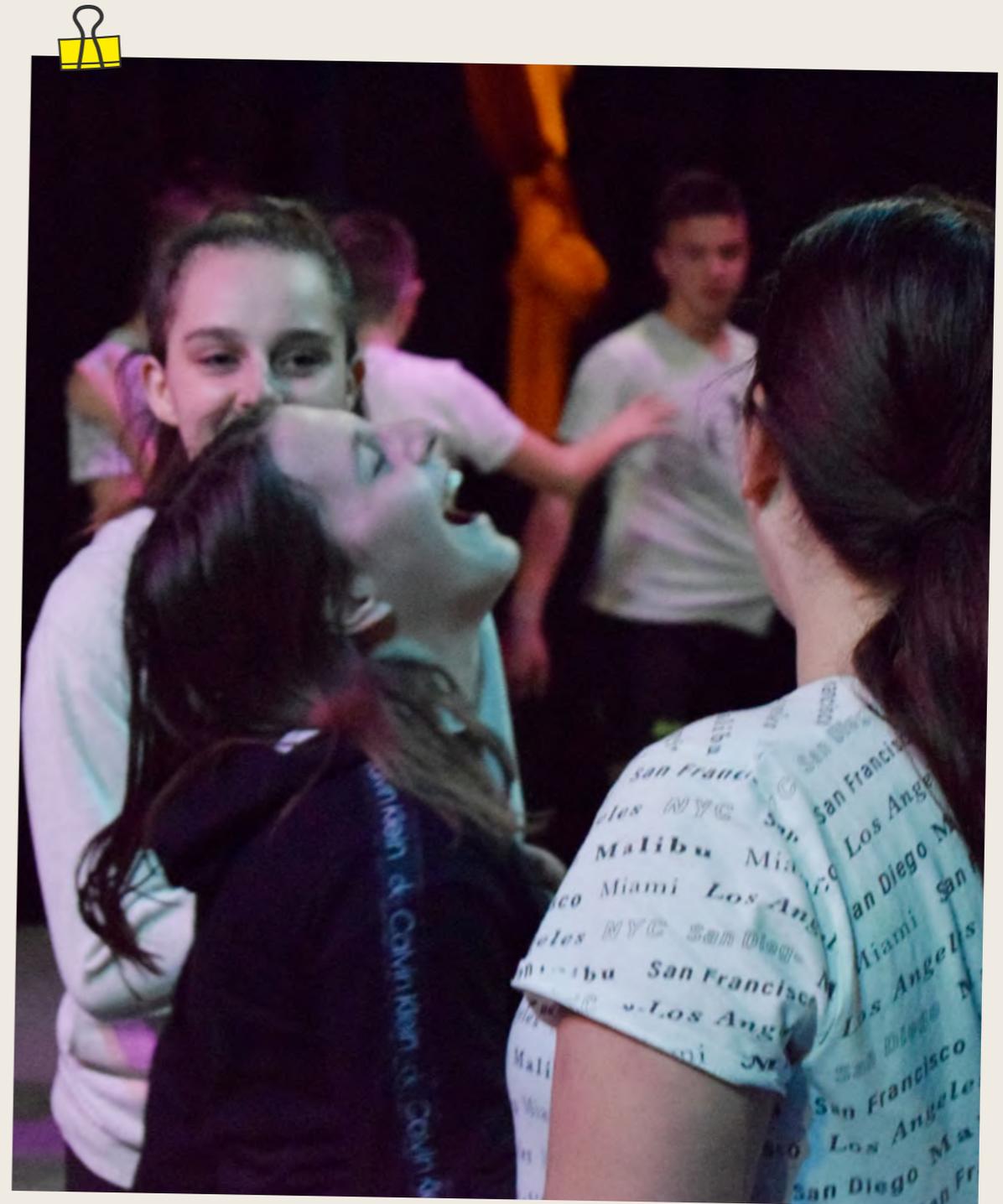
'Safety is about a space where you can express your feelings, even when they are not comfortable, when you disagree, get angry or sad'.

'In order to build a safe space, feelings and emotions need to be talked through and, re-elaborated. It takes time to build a safe space: the idea of safety can change as time passes and the group becomes more and more able to welcome and discuss different feelings and experiences'.

'Safety is knowing that you can always take your time, leave and come back, that you are the only one for your boundaries and for respecting them'.

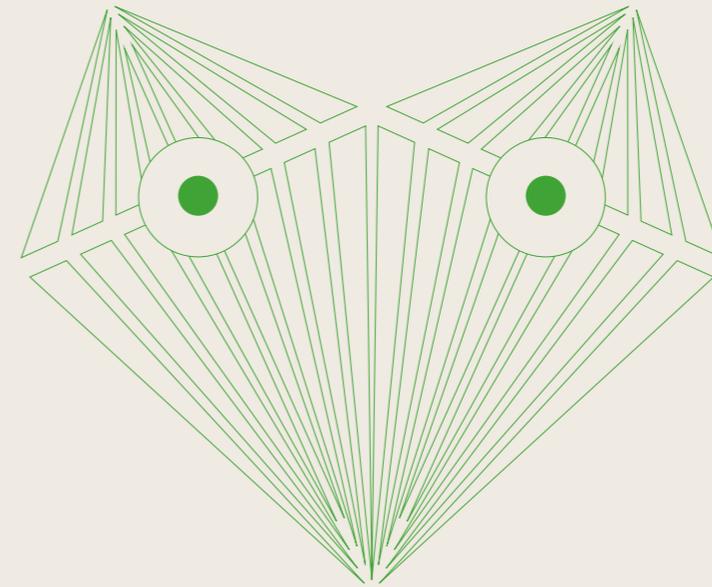
'Safety is the group's responsibility: it is facilitated by the trainer but it has to be appropriated by the group'.

'The safe space is a goal that you never fully achieve: you always need to work on it, re-discuss what is safe and what isn't'.





04 \_\_\_\_\_



**LIVING  
THESPACE**

# Introduction

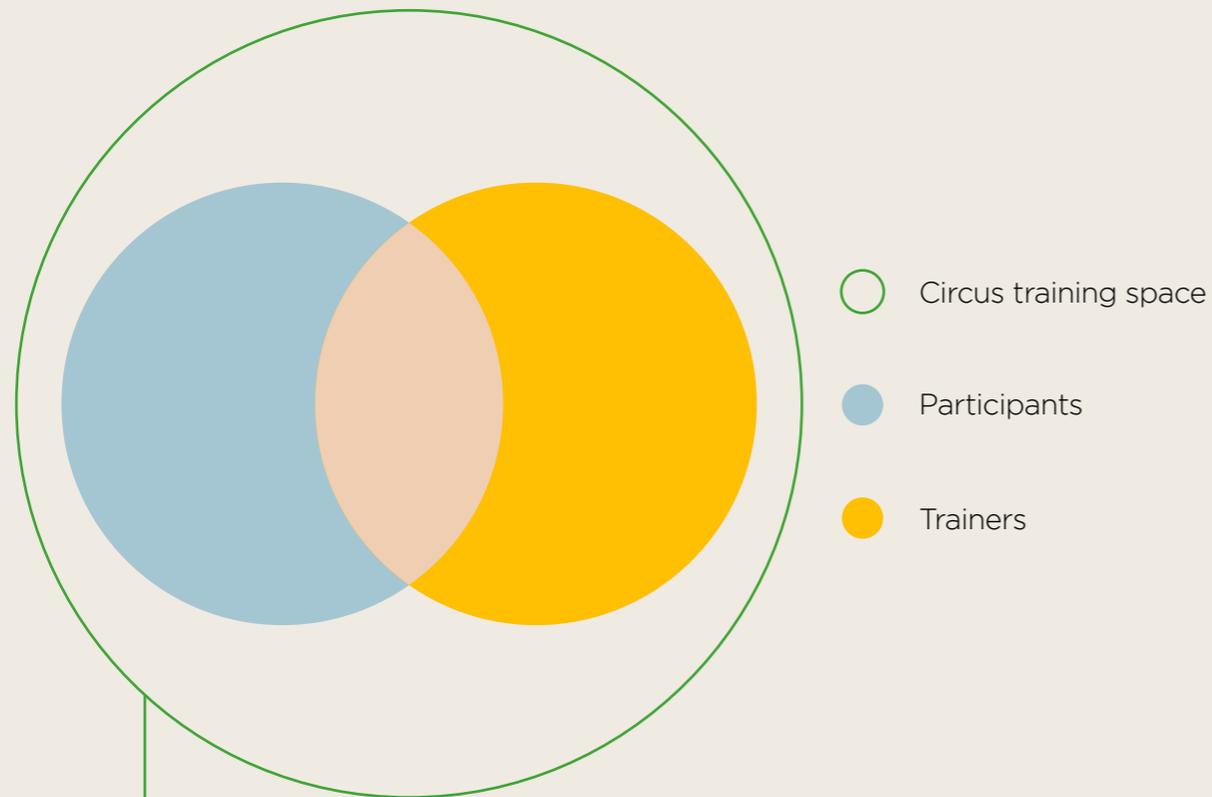
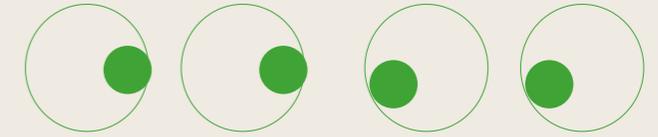


Figure 1. The place of encounter



This chapter is about **the entrance into the place of encounter**, the moment when students and trainers meet in the training space, bringing with them their own ideas about circus, teaching and their own life experiences. The space has been carefully prepared by trainers and circus schools, as well as by students and families who decide to join. Some trainers have practiced circus and/or circus training for a long time; others have taken advanced courses on sports, performing arts, pedagogy, social work, received masters' degrees or vocational training. The majority may have done both.

Trainers enter the classroom with a teaching plan, a list of objectives (their own and those of the school), expectations and intentions. Students come with a bag of expectations, attitudes, desires and ideas about the course and the trainers. **Students and trainers meet in the training space, in between expectations, feelings, emotions, attitudes, previous experiences of teaching programmes and styles.** Some will bring open and positive attitudes, ready to embrace whatever comes. Others may be dubious and uncertain, while still others may feel sure about what they want and will do in the course. There are as many possible scenarios as there are participants, feelings and emotions.

**This chapter highlight the central role of this uncertainty in the feelings, emotions and sensations at play in an encounter.** The aim is to reflect on, and to be aware of, the multiple (un)planned scenarios that can come up in a circus class due to the participants' cultural backgrounds and geographies, as well as their emotions, feelings, attitudes and sensations. It is important to reassure trainers, participants and schools about this uncertainty and convey the openness, flexibility and abilities that must be developed so as to appropriately respond to uncertainty.

### In this chapter you will find:

- ✓ Some elements of reflection on the training place as a LIVING space
- ✓ Three stories that emerged during the fieldwork that provide context for beginning to ask questions and reflect on the circus training practice
- ✓ An example of good practice for negotiating differences, finding common ground and establishing clear communication
- ✓ Suggestions of tools for circus trainers to use during the encounter
- ✓ An extra exercise with situations we observed during our fieldwork. These situations stimulated questions that can help us further reflect.

# The training place as a living space

We understand the training place as a space in motion, a LIVING space. This is both a physical/material place with certain description – a square, circular or rectangular shape, square metres and size – with specific equipment and spatial distribution, columns, walls, etc. It also one made of human moods, atmospheres, attitudes, energy body movements; a space filled with verbal and non-verbal communication.

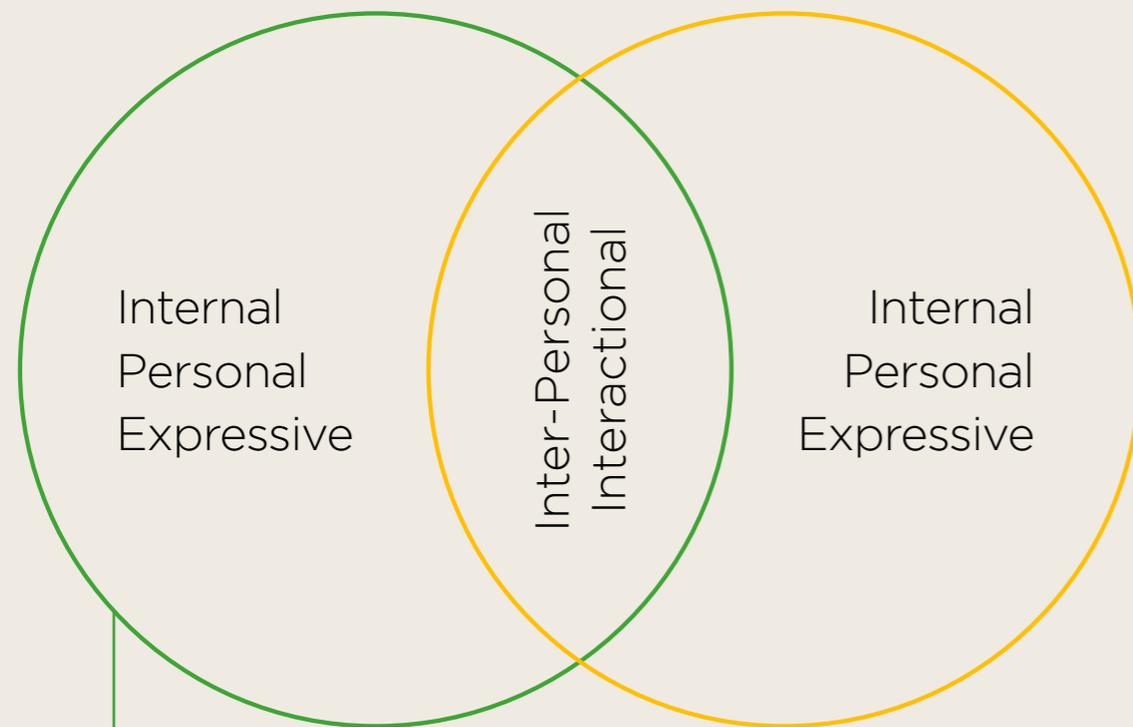


Figure 2. SPACE

It is quite difficult, if not impossible, to foresee the full myriad of possibilities. How different bodies react together, the emotions and attitudes that enter the space and how those feelings and emotions transform at the very first moment of the encounter and through the session.

Training tools, methods, techniques, objectives, goals and evaluation forms are all essential in planning a training session and foreseeing possible scenarios. Another essential component is **awareness**. To be aware of both my own and people's life backgrounds, emotions, feelings, attitudes and sensations; how they affect both, me as a trainer and participants at the moment of the encounter. To reflect on the specific baggage one brings to the journey; to the actual place of encounter where we all embrace and embody difference.

We found 3 key aspects that can help us develop our awareness and prepare for an intercultural encounter: **communication, connection, inclusion and motivation**.

**COMMUNICATION** is the material and 'glue' for building relationships and unite different understandings. Around communication, we find **CONNECTION, INCLUSION** and **MOTIVATION**. These interrelated aspects create the communication and awareness needed at the training space.

The ability to connect with others is crucial for recognising them and the place they occupy in the training session; to make them feel valuable and present, included and motivated. Even more when they struggle to connect with the group. Connection between the participants and trainers helps create a safe space, with cooperation and respect between all the participants and their communities.

To reflect on these aspects and illustrate how communication, connection, inclusion and motivation operate and relate to each other, in the next section we present three stories about different scenarios and challenges that trainers face. We present questions and reflections that the reader can use to guide discussion and help participants understand the stories. The last section reflects on games, activities and rituals related to these and many other scenarios.



# Stories..

## STORY 1.

### ABOUT TIME: ARRIVING LATE !

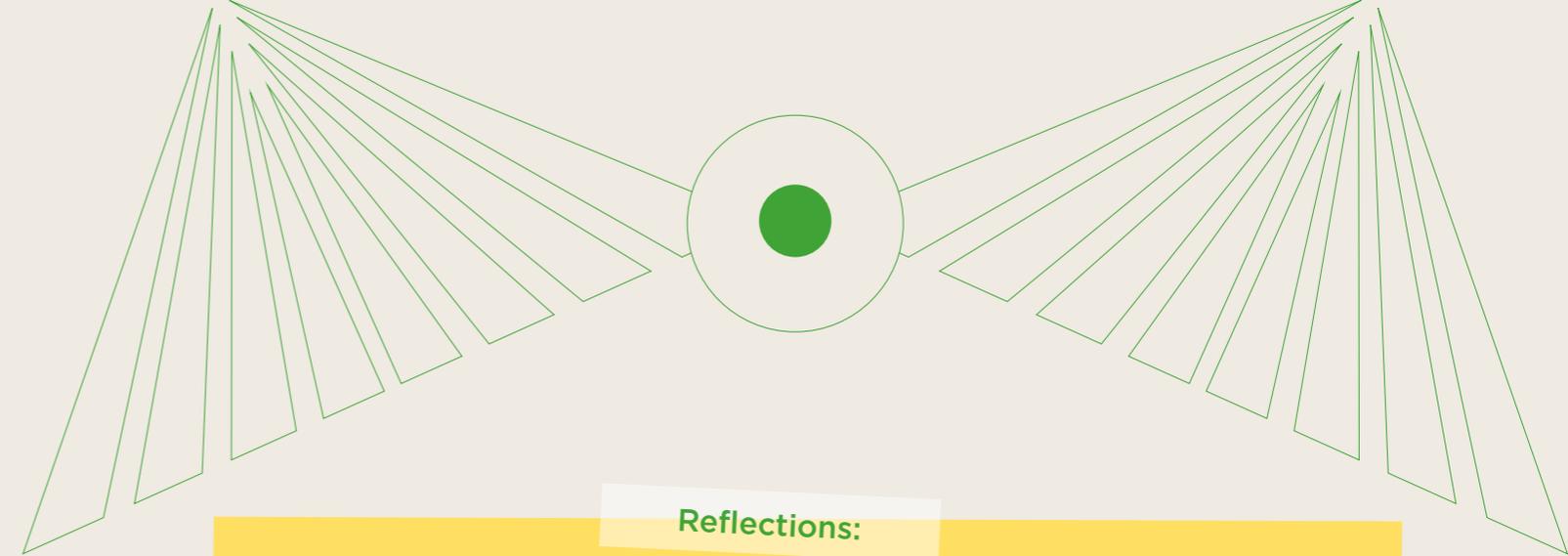
A group of children comes late to class while the trainer wonders...

*'The class started 15 minutes ago and we have already done the warm-up games with some kids. I feel nervous. For a long time I have tried to impress on them how important punctuality is and now I feel frustrated. When they finally arrived I saw them behaving as if that was normal. They barely apologised! They started distracting the others, chatting and playing around. I felt mad but tried not to show that. I told them that punctuality is a sign of respect towards the group, towards myself as a trainer and also towards themselves because if they do not come on time they lose the opportunity to attend classes. They showed no regret. But I hoped my words touched them.'*

Questions:

- How would you act in a situation like that?
- How do you communicate in your class?
- How does communication change depending on the age group?
- How does it change based on a group's cultural make-up?
- To what extent do you agree/disagree with the trainer?
- Do you communicate differently with diverse groups (i.e., age, culture, gender, disabilities, etc.)?
- Is punctuality a sign of respect for you and for those around you? What about friends who live in other sections of the city or another country? How time notions vary across cultures, peoples and even across the 'ages' (see suggested readings<sup>1</sup>)? How to bring together those differences of time conception?

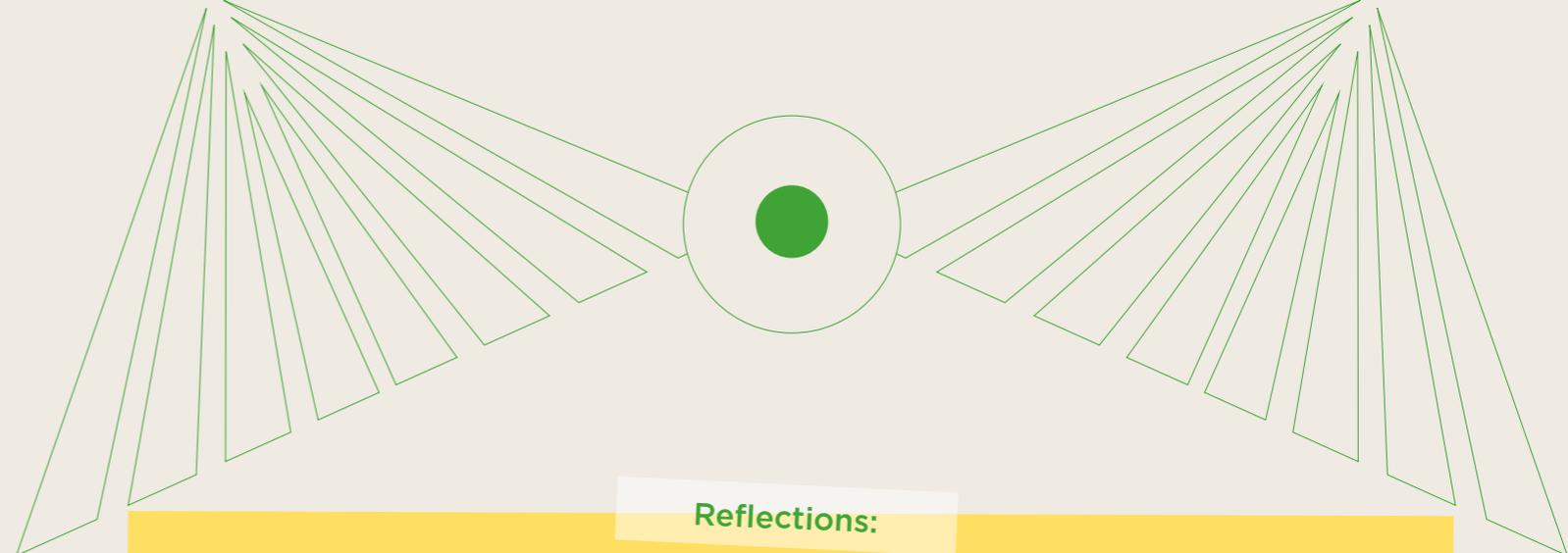
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<https://www.timeanddate.com/calendar/mayan.html>  
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### Reflections:

In the example above, we want to note how first impressions and reactions shape and alter the training space: The myriad of situations, misunderstandings and interpretations that can arise even if emotions, thoughts or feelings are not expressed. There are indirect readings and interpretations of others' reactions, expressions and actions, (mis)reading between the lines. But also how key aspects like the notion of time vary across peoples, backgrounds and cultures.

Generally in circus, and particularly in the schools involved in this project, we engage with diverse groups in the same space. It is usual to find people of different ages and nationalities in the same classroom or training programme. To understand them, awareness and communication (both verbal and non-verbal) are essential. Different social groups have different types of communication, language styles, terminologies and gestures. Circus trainers have developed tools to communicate verbally and non-verbally. Being aware of differences helps enrich these methods and create others.



## STORY 2.

### MELITA. A 'SHY' CHILD

A trainer tells,

*'This little shy child, Melita, doesn't want to participate in the activities. She stays alone in a corner, playing with some balls and absently looking at the other children doing the collective activity. I approach her. She looks at me just for a few seconds and then returns to her own game. I realise how difficult it is for her to participate in that particular group activity. I proposed a different game to the group. And she starts to participate.'*

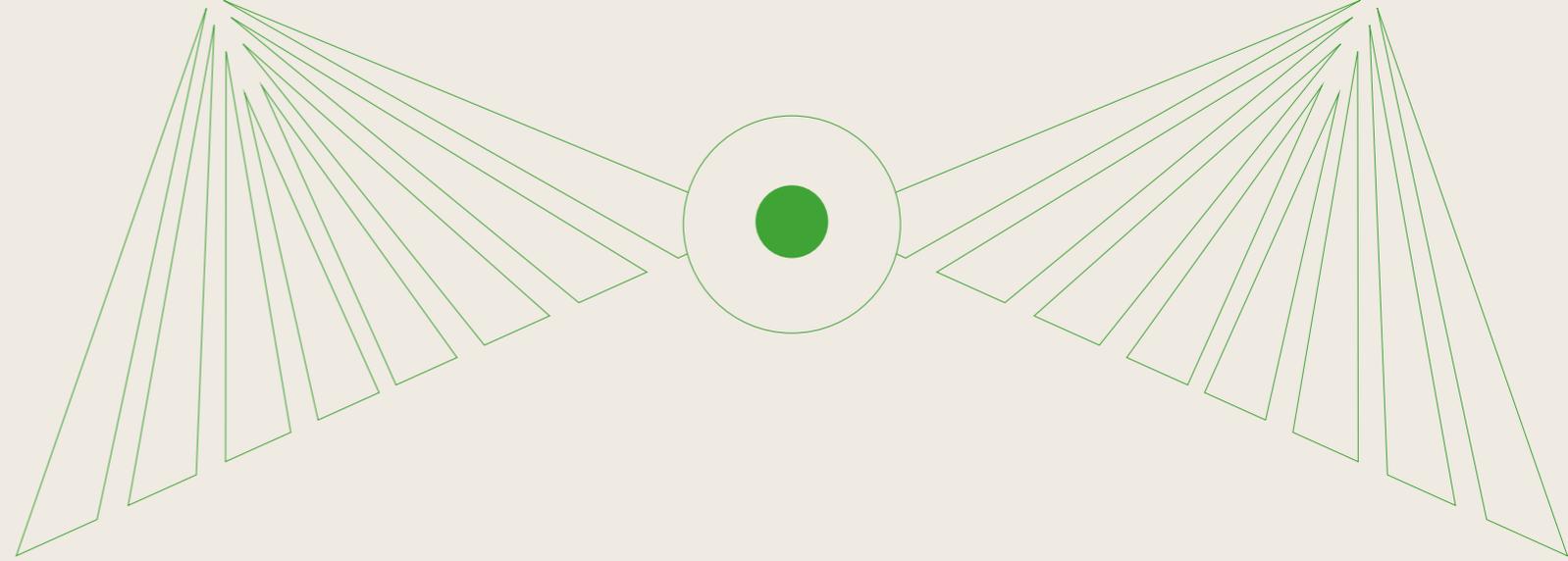
Questions:

- *Is Melita 'a little shy child'? Is she expressing 'shyness'? Could you 'read' her attitude differently?*
- *How do you recognize the presence of different actors in the group?*
- *How do you try to engage with those who do not want to participate in the activities, or who remain silent and detached from the rest of the group?*
- *How do you feel and what do you think when a student does not participate and separate themselves from the rest of the group?*

### Reflections:

Melita's story and the late arrival in the first story highlight how participants, especially children, want to be seen and heard. There are many ways they show this: by misbehaving, being rowdy, moving around, or simply going to a corner and becoming absent. When someone misbehaves or isolates, it's always good to further engage with the hidden message. This could be done by having a word with them, asking them to perform a trick, or simply changing the activity to see the reactions. Trainers use strategies to listen to and to make every student feel included and actively engaged by finding alternative ways to encourage their participation, even if they would take part by staying alone in the corner, they are still part of the class. Awareness of the hidden messages could once more help to strengthen these methods.

Not every activity or exercise appeals to everybody; shyness, body shapes, previous experiences, abilities, acting out in front of a group and many other things condition the responses we give to certain tools and activities. Many times it is a matter of inviting them to engage in different ways, asking them directly or finding other forms for them to participate. Trainers can allow students to change a game or part of it, ask them to be in charge of some warm-up exercises, let them add their ideas to the game or training. Students remain motivated when they can contribute to the activity.



STORY 3.  
**SOCIALIZING AND  
LOOKING GOOD**



A trainer's story:

*There was a girl who had not found any motivation to train. She wanted to look graceful on the trapeze and perform amazing tricks. However, she did not make any effort to improve in the exercises requiring physical strength. She preferred easy tricks than those requiring more effort. She wanted to do better without heavy conditioning training.*

*As a trainer I explained to her that there is no easy way to be the best. But she seems to not have understood. I felt frustrated because I wanted to teach her more but she was not motivated I tried to explain my point through specific exercises and demonstrating improved tricks to impress her. But nothing motivated her. It seemed like she came to class more to socialise than to work.*

Questions:

- Have you experienced a similar situation?
- How would you feel in this case?
- Do you understand the trainer's impressions and efforts to motivate the girl?
- How would you motivate participants?
- Is it really important that they are the 'best' circus artists? Or is it enough for them to socialize with others? Is it necessary to combine both?
- What is the trainer's motivation?
- What are your own frustrations as a trainer and what are the student's?

**Reflections:**

Motivation is essential in any training session. Trainers encourage students to find their own internal motivation which will keep them going on. The motivation will animate them even outside the circus space when trainers are not around. This example aims to address this situation and to highlight the importance of finding and understanding the motivations for students and trainers to teach that class.

Before any attempt to introduce a motivational exercise, it is crucial to better understand the deeper motivations that bring students to the class; what they say when they begin as well as those 'hidden' or 'unconfessional' aspects that sometimes are harder to express directly. For example, to see a classmate they like, to socialise instead of learning any circus skills; to be cool; to become famous; to lose/gain weight, etc. They are as important as learning certain skills, learning to concentrate or something concrete and measurable. All those reasons are valid and highly dependent on specific individual motivations, as well as the entire class and community. It is thus important to reflect on everyone's deeper motivations, and how those motivations are part or not part of the school programme, motivations and objectives; and how to incorporate them.

# A Good Practice!

*Negotiating differences. Setting a common ground and a clear communication*

A good practice for addressing the situations illustrated above and to create clear communication is to **include an initial session that we call 'establishing common ground and negotiating differences'**. This is a general term that trainers can adapt to describe their own styles and creativity. With **'common ground'** we mean the minimum requirements or main principles that are important for all class members: for example, arriving at a certain time, listening when others speak, not talking to their peers while the trainer is giving instructions, doing a 'catharsis' exercise when the class gets noisy, etc. All those practices that you and the students consider fundamental for guaranteeing group harmony. Take into consideration the school's principles as well as your own - and those of the students and their communities.

**To establish a clear communication** channel and to negotiate differences, it is important to connect first with the group and to better understand them. By knowing them better, you can better understand their behaviour and attitudes, which will help to you interpret them. This connection must be made from the very beginning, in the first session with a group. Communication and connection emerge through the active, collective participation of everyone in the room and everything they bring with them.

This is a session when the group jointly negotiates its common ground and the actions to take when it is destroyed. The common ground and the principles may later be revised to see if they're working or not. If not, they should be revised by the group. This practice helps to establish clear communications and connection among the members of a group throughout the course.



*Training is a process in which the trainer and the group work together. Trainers choose their own teaching paths and negotiating tools. Some will use more music, others humour and so on. It's important to be flexible and adapt the negotiating tools and common ground according to the needs and qualities of each group. Like a trainer each group is special and has special needs and desires.*





These tips can help you plan the first session:

- Identify your own 'ground' and principles that are important to you.
- Introduce yourself and share your own 'ground'.
- This introduction could work as setting the scene: how they react and asking what they think so you can establish common ground together.
- Talk about their motivations and share yours. The common ground could be defined according to those motivations. This demonstrates the interest in listening to the students and shows them that their opinions and interests are important. It also engages with their own needs. And This way they feel more motivated to follow the ground principles and respect the common ground.
- Observe if those motivations coincide with the students' attitudes in class: how much time they dedicate to certain exercises and how engaged they are with different apparatuses and people. Ask again about their motivation: Are their actions motivating them or not? How? You can also guide them, pointing them to different aspects of circus training, and different ways in which circus skills and training sessions could be useful for increasing their motivation.
- It is important to remember that you can communicate through different exercises and activities and not just through talking or questioning. There are many ways to communicate: This is what the trainer's personal style, knowledge and experience bring to the session. Their own way of doing circus! Awareness, self-reflection and observation could enrich these methods.
- Keep going back to these initial reflections throughout the course. Constantly discuss and reflect.

## Tools

- Below you will find some aspects that could help to plan this first session: Identify your own 'ground' and principles that are important to you. Rituals are meaningful and important. Start with a game, warm up, do strength exercises, circus, finish. Rituals are activities that are repeated in a specific order every time, like a schedule, a pattern or a game exercise with a purpose. They are predictable and help build confidence, connection and create a safe space. Even when trainers propose something new, they follow the same pattern to build up confidence and trust in the process.
- Use games and activities that are open, flexible and allow for exploration. These activities will to complement the ritual and help contribute a 'safer' atmosphere.
- Asking them what they think so you can set a common ground together. Talk about their motivations and share yours. The common ground could be defined Traditional exercises and activities to develop different moments of the session: Warming up, group relation, circus exercises... They establish basic connection.
- Connect with emotions. Use eye contact and exercises that allow you to enter into connection with others. Use music to facilitate entry into a specific mood. To work on specific emotions, use a particular song. Music is important for creating atmosphere.
- Sometimes first moving around and speaking without the trainer engaging makes it easier for a group to connect.
- Intervene to help the group work differently. Mix up the participants through exercises - including very quick ones - and games.
- Slowly start to get to know each other and establish relationships by using exercises as a form of communication - not just body gestures and language. Observe and reflect on how students react to the exercises.



- Take time to observe. Try to look at the session as an observer rather than a trainer. Try observing a colleague's session. Ask yourself: what did you notice that you would not have noticed if you had been the trainer?
- Take notes and think about the sessions. Record what they did and what to do differently in the future. This is important for improving your teaching – even if you don't get paid for it.
- Journaling and taking notes are incredibly helpful for increasing your awareness. Look at specific things aside from specific circus activities that you can analyse after class.
- Meet with other trainers and share your experiences; compare actions, outcomes, what you think is good for the group; Take at least five minutes between training sessions for discussions.
- It's good to have two observers in a class so you can share your thoughts. They can help broaden your vision: You can't see or keep track of everything!



## Other Exercise:

Reflect on the cases below and consider the roles of inclusion, motivation, connection and communication.

*How would you engage with these situations?*

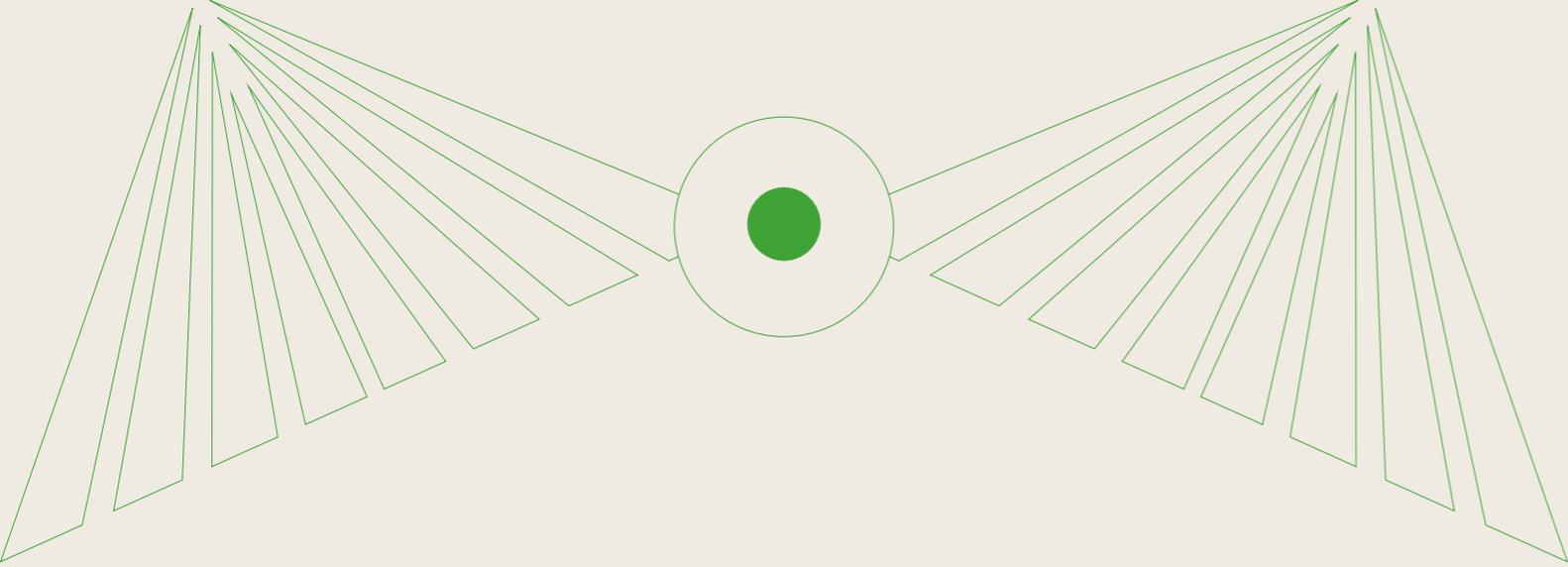
*Look at the scenarios as an observer. What do you see? How do trainers and participants react?*

Take notes of what you see and the ideas that come to your mind.

Plan your introduction and initial session on establishing a common ground and negotiating differences'. Review your notes and journal and add more notes and observations. Return to your plan.

Design your own rituals, exercises and tools to enhance communication, inclusion and motivation.

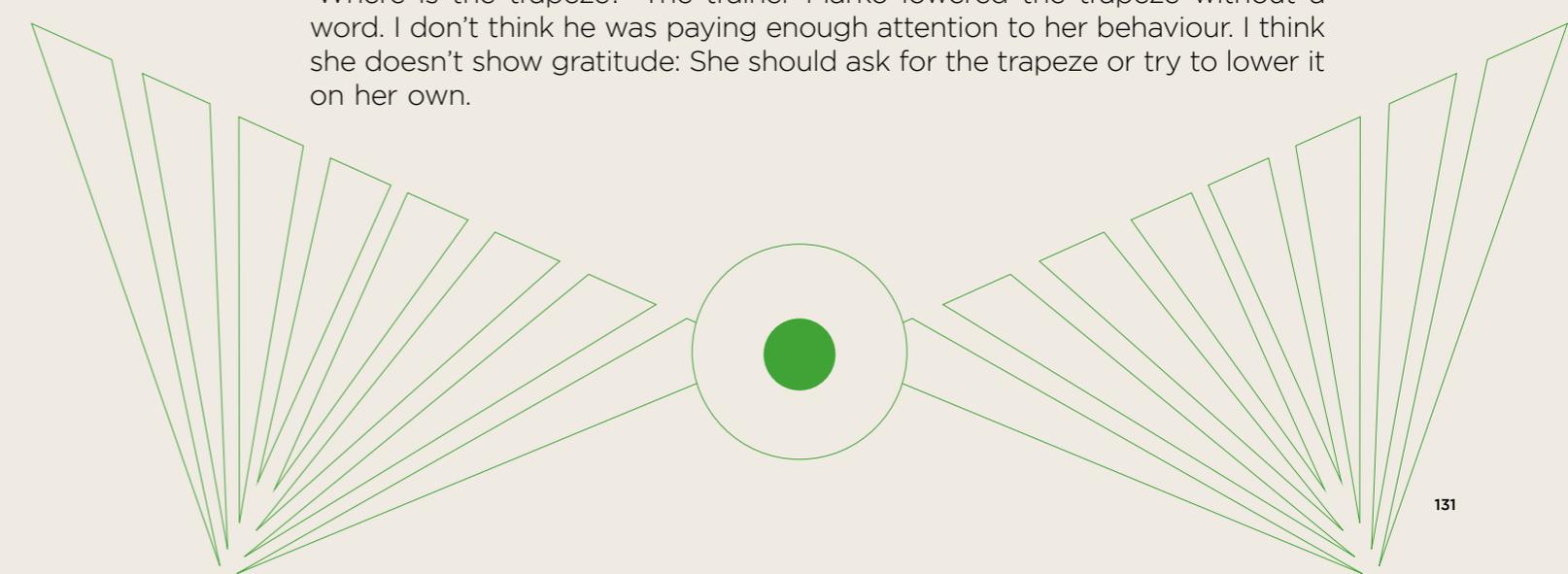
Share your experiences with other trainers.



- 1- Misbehaviour (laughing and talking to each other) during evaluations. One trainer said such behaviour is inappropriate, that they're acting like kids. I think that this affected them a little because they want to be viewed as adults not kids. The students wanted to be in charge of the practice. They thought that they could lead the protocol. They were proud of themselves. The trainers were disappointed and said so.
- 2- Students are using bad words and calling each other 'animals'. We discussed the situation and decided that they cannot use bad words or call each other names in the classroom. The feelings were mixed: Some students thought this was normal, others felt it was insulting. Trainers were of the opinion that it's not appropriate in public.
- 3- Some students like to talk while others are giving instructions or speaking. Sean, a trainer and supervisor, used the ball game and a circle to manage the situation. The rule was that only the one holding the ball could talk. That made a big difference. As an observer, I realised that they want to show their presence in the room (by talking or moving). They want to be noticed, especially because they accept Sean as an authority figure because they've known him longer. Lina, a student, expressed that this was absurd because everybody has their own time to express their opinions. She thinks this happened because everybody wants to say what they think straight away for fear of forgetting their thoughts.



- 4- Sandi and Emir weren't following the rules. Instead, they were punching gym mats. So we went over the rules once again. Emir wasn't listening so we sent him home and informed the parents. At first they were trying to be boastful. Then Emir just wanted to tease. Lina thinks it was the right decision to send Emir home. But she didn't feel that his behaviour affected her.
- 5- I noticed that Melita wanted to use a trapeze but didn't ask if someone would help her to lower it. She was standing like a queen waiting to be served: 'Where is the trapeze?' The trainer Marko lowered the trapeze without a word. I don't think he was paying enough attention to her behaviour. I think she doesn't show gratitude: She should ask for the trapeze or try to lower it on her own.

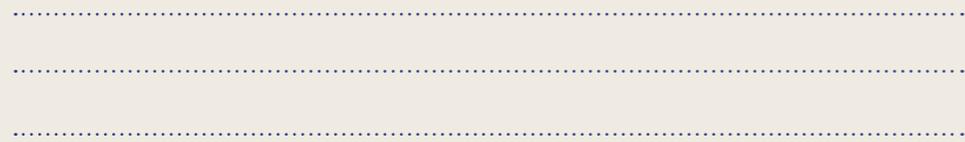


# Reflections

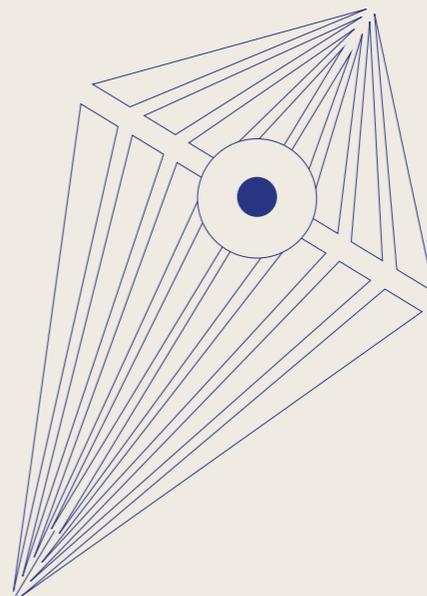
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05



**EXITING  
THE SPACE**



**This chapter is about the post-training-session moment of reflecting and analysing the encounter. What we call 'exiting the space' is also a process. It includes the very end of the circus workshop, as well as the reflectivity required of the trainer and the organisation. They must review the encounter and analyse other actions to be taken to facilitate and ensure its continuity.**

**In this chapter, you will find :**

- A story recalling the encounter process in the project studied by the Palestinian CircusSchool
- Questions and reflections
- Tools to engage with journaling, reflecting and analysing the encounter as a process of exiting the space

## The story..

Maya is a 15-year-old Palestinian girl who has Down Syndrome. She lives in the countryside around Ramallah. She started practising circus when the circus school launched a circus project in the rehabilitation centre she attends.

In 2020, she joined a new project in the Palestinian Circus School (PCS) premises that gathered 5 students who had been practicing circus since 2013 with 5 students from the rehabilitation center, including Maya. The project aimed at highlighting our students' ability to practise the circus values of equality, inclusion and integration. The PCS explored how this integration process impacted on the five advanced students and how they developed into actors of change using social circus. The PCS also explored the impact of such joint creation on audiences and how it raises awareness about the rights of people with mental health issues. The group trained together from December 2019 to January 2020 and then presented their creation in March 2020.



*Before engaging further with this collective experience and the story of of Maya, it is important to understand the workshop's context. Palestine is under Israeli military occupation, which affects the daily life of all Palestinians.*

*When you look in any direction while walking in the street or at home, and examine what you see, you find that in one way or another, the Israeli occupation controls all aspects of Palestinian lives. The Israelis target school curricula and prohibit the work of social, cultural, artistic, health and human rights NGOs, often arresting their employees. It controls the water aquifer and electricity, as well as municipal infrastructures. It even targets outdoor advertisements and the economy. Palestinians are constantly being robbed of the most minute details of daily life.*



Palestinians' difficult reality has created an unsafe environment for children's education and thoughts. Palestinian society is forced to witness Israeli violence daily, which deeply affects it – especially the children. It contributes to defining violence as a way of communication and interaction. It reinforces the notion that decision-making and authority belong to the strongest, and reduces the opportunities for dialogue and collective action. This is how Israeli militarism penetrates all aspects of daily life and reduces trust amongst members of society.



90% of people with disabilities in the West Bank do not go to schools or education centres, and the families of those who can go to some centres pay high costs for their children's education. People with disabilities in Palestine do not have any right to education, employment and political and social representation. There is no parliament to provide justice for them.

The coordinator of the social program in one of the rehabilitation centres with which the Palestine Circus School works, says:

'I have worked for 30 years in the field of disabilities and during this time I have seen an uncountable number of physical, psychological and societal violence against people with disabilities. The most recent case was of a family that imprisoned a person in their house in difficult conditions, not allowing them to go into the street. There is no government follow-up; I have many such cases.'

In this context, bringing together these 10 young people and supporting them through circus practices is challenging and important. At the beginning, Nayef, the coach, observed:

'Maya was shy and did not take the initiative when we began the exercises. But after some time, as she she formed friendships and a relationship with the group, Maya became more effective.'



At first, during the training, the researcher observed that the youth were all trying to guess the abilities of each other, there was some mistrust. Communication was not easy between the two groups, the youth circus practitioners seem to struggle to find a way to understand and communicate with the youth with disabilities (Field notes 24 Jan. 2020).

The researcher highlights in the notes that this practice requires a lot of patience from the trainer to facilitate this communication. If attention is given to one participant, the trainer needs to ensure that he/she gives it equally to the others, as the participants seem to pay very clear attention to this (Fieldnotes 7 Feb. 2020).



After some time, the researcher observed that the students who don't have mental disabilities started to develop skills for communicating with the other youth. They start to understand how they function and to find their way of communication (Fieldnotes 14 Feb. 2020). This way of communicating enabled them to engage in new relationships. Maya, who was rather shy at the beginning, develops a strong relationship with Noha. They became friends and interact a lot, playing and sitting together (as shown in the pictures). This was unlike Maya's life in the rehab centre, where she is always under the care and the authority of someone. The children with disabilities had space in the circus to engage with each other without the intervention of adults or authority.

*Taking notes to document the process is one method that helped the trainer/ researcher adjust their practice and support the encounter. Detailed data was collected on what happened during the class, with descriptions of the embodied conduct of the participants and the trainers' actions, reactions and discourse... Documenting this information in detail provides data for analysis (evaluation) and helps the trainer adjust and develop subsequent classes. There is no single model for all cases: The circumstances and technical and social objectives differ. The session objectives vary in light of the political, economic and social context - creating the factors that produce a communication culture. It is this communication culture that youth, including youth with disabilities, use to interact.*

*Maya's family considered the circus a recreational activity. They did not anticipate the effect it would have on their daughter. When the final show was produced, Jana's mother was in tears because she did not expect her daughter to produce something so beautiful, or to be productive and creative (Fieldnotes 15 Oct. 2021).*

*In this picture, Maya is introducing her friend Noha to her mother. The researcher recalls being touched by this photo that shows how Maya is proudly showing her mum that she has a friend (Fieldnotes 27 Oct. 2021).*



# Questions and reflections on that story

In this story the trainer's journaling provides content for reflecting after the workshop session. It answers the questions:

*'As a trainer, what did you observe ?  
What did you see ?'*



The journaling (the notes and reflections) enables the trainer to record what happens in the class. Taking detailed descriptions of the positions and posture of the trainer, as well as reactions of the participants, behaviours, interactions, dialogues, the organisation of the circus space, the interest and disinterest...

## Tools

The tables below suggest a structure for note-taking.

Answering the following questions will help you make very descriptive notes and push you to write as much as possible (for more details on the journaling methodology, see the introductory chapter: The boat).

These tables accompany the preparation and evaluation tools that help you plan and evaluate your class. We hope to provide you space to note and focus on more subtle elements that could be perceived as insignificant in technical workshop planning.

For more references on circus workshop planning and evaluation, you can check the following tools :

• Circus Trans-Formation module entitled 'The act of teaching'

<https://www.caravancircusnetwork.eu/wp-content/uploads/media/CTF-Guidebook.pdf>

• Palestinian Circus School Training for trainers guidebook

<https://palcircus.ps/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/circus-bookA42co-final-reduced-size.pdf>



This tool provides content for reflecting, analysing and questioning - rather than evaluating success and the specific technical or social objectives reached.

It is important to keep in mind that these tools are propositions: Cultural diversity and diverging contexts may create different needs. These models are not sacrosanct but are suitable for Maya and others from her environment.

## 1- Observation/journaling table

<b>What is happening?</b> <i>Describe the main idea/moment you are observing</i>	<b>Intervention :</b> <i>Who did what ? Who said what and how ? What could/should have been done ? Why did this or that not happen ?</i>	<b>Describing the participants' feelings, emotions and gestures</b>	<b>Follow-up through interviews/personal communication</b> <i>What happened ? Why do you think this happened ? How did you feel when this happened ?</i>
<p>Two boys arrive late. The class has already started, we've finished the starting rituals and begun to play the first game when they come.</p>	<p>Me, the trainer, told them to be on time next time or they would lose the opportunity to be in this group.</p> <p>After the training, I had a discussion with the other trainer and we discussed the tension between having some collective rules (such as being on time) and my reaction, which was almost like blackmailing the boys who were late. We discussed how to impress on them the need to be on time without having such an extreme reaction.</p>	<p>They walked into the class as if there was no problem and looking as if they didn't care.</p>	<p>The fact that they didn't apologise made me feel frustrated and angry. So I threatened to kick them out of the class. However, I didn't make any effort to find out why they were late.</p>

Taking notes can help you think about 'exiting the space' in a broader perspective – and not just as the 'end of the workshop'. Considering circus as an intercultural encounter requires us to think of circus practice within a broad framework that includes the workshop's space and time as well as its organisation, location and partners (for all stakeholders see 'Preparing the space').

It's important to share your observations and analyses with other actors.

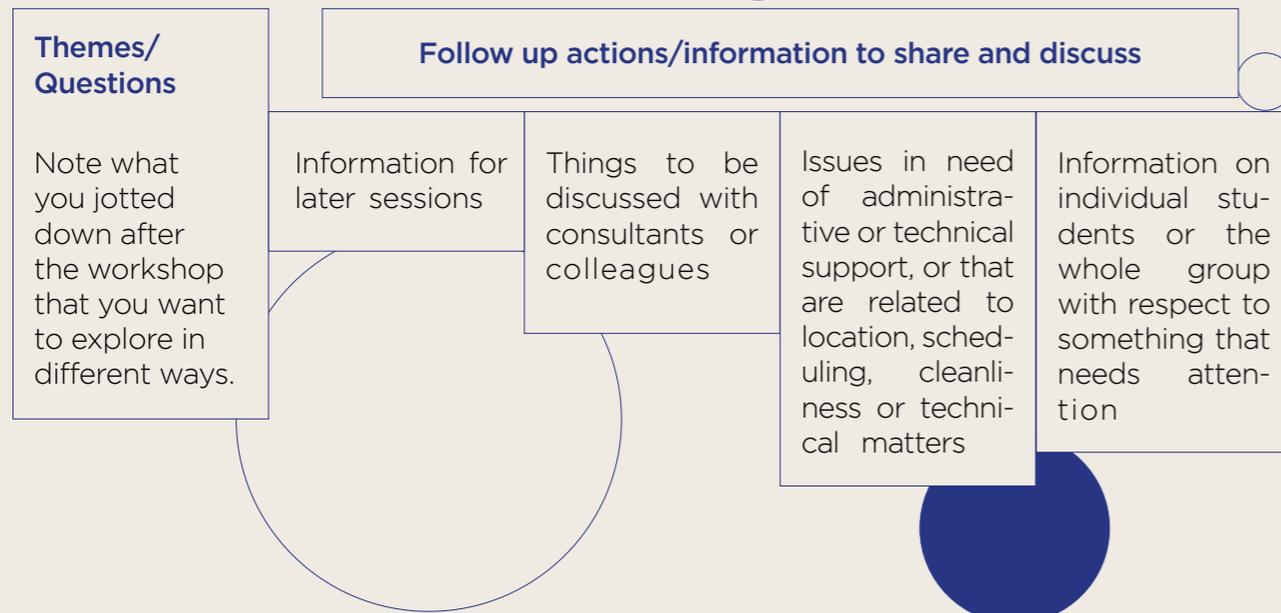
Table 1 can help us further examine four aspects:

- Identify themes and questions raised

- Issues to be discussed with the team or other trainers or social workers, or any other actor who can provide insights and support that the circus trainer/circus organisation can not provide

- Information we need to develop the program, or we need to know before the next training meetings
- Information and issues that need to be discussed, with consultants or co-workers
- Issues that need administrative or technical support, related to location, coordination of time, cleanliness, and technical matters
- Information about students individually or collectively, when noticing something that needs attention

## 1- Analytical table and follow-up actions



This table will help :

- To highlight themes and High-light themes and issues that may not have come up earlier

- To consider the workshop in terms of all the actors involved who can facilitate the intercultural encounter.

## Food for thought

These tables are tools for circus trainers to analyse their practice, highlight the limitations of their role and connect with colleagues and partner organisations working with them on the intercultural encounter. As the research team discussed these referral systems and the importance of practice analysis, concern was voiced about how to do that.

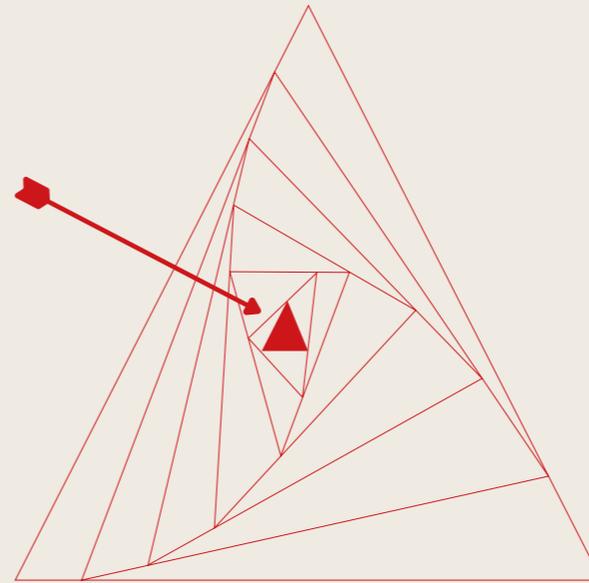
*How is this analytical work taken into consideration within circus organisations?  
How are projects funded to qualitatively analyse practice?*

The self-reflection that is part of this qualitative analysis can be very emotional for trainers. The projects researched show the importance of circus trainers being emotionally engaged with creating an intercultural encounter. All the reflectivity and analysis that this requires can be challenging. The research team highlighted the need for professional guidance and supervision - in addition to technical circus teaching.

*How is well being valued within your circus organisations ?  
What space for supervision is made accessible and available for circus trainers ?*







# CONCLUSION

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# Story

The boat is back in the harbour to rest, refuel, reconsider and get ready to sail again. It got stuck at moments, then started moving again. Now it has reached an end. This is an interesting time to look at the transformations and evolutions nourished by the journey: Have we collected new ideas or redefined our values? What have we learnt? What have we left along the way? What revisions, repairs and adjustments do we need?

This project was an intercultural encounter in many various ways. **First of all, because it involved people with different professions, social backgrounds, ages, genders and native languages.** Each person had a different experience, understanding of reality, way of communicating, stories and values.

**Second, it drew together academia and circus practice.** Some of the researchers felt uncomfortable with the research task at the beginning, imagining it is too hard, boring, frustrating: *'I was scared, I didn't want to be the last one, the less experienced'*

**Third, it has been a long and difficult process, where initial expectations had to be renegotiated, goals and strategies modified.** It included complications, challenges, frustrations and a 'motivation roller coaster' – to quote one researcher – due to the pandemic and the complexity of a project involving six circus schools, one international network and a university.

The 'Circus as Intercultural Encounter' project simultaneously provided opportunities and challenges; it fostered flexibility and creative powers, as well as blurriness and messiness. However, the team managed to overcome the fatigue of the encounter, to 'sit in the fire' of diversity<sup>1</sup> – risking misunderstandings, stymied communication, conflict and frustration. In the words of one researcher: *'Each time I was stuck with something and thought there was no solution, we discussed and found a solution to develop and use what we had. Nothing was thrown away even if it implied different ways... I saw that there is no right or wrong, that all details can be used and become learning points.'*

Moreover, seeds were planted for future projects, to search for deeper communication, new ideas about circus, diversity, about how we encounter others.

That requires:

- flexibility and adaptability
- Collective working and trust in the group brain
- Trying to effectively disrupt patterns and established practice
- Looking at new possibilities without knowing where and what we would get
- Enabling surprising outcomes while remembering our responsibility to our values and communities.

This handbook provides insights into creating a sustainable circus space, while keeping in mind that the means depend on local specificities. It can be seen as a compass that points out directions and poses questions to reflect and develop and inspire, without claiming or needing to know and tell which direction is right or wrong, how to reach one's destination or where the treasure is buried.

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# 'What to look and ask for'

**Data about organisation**  
 (size, history, funding, staff, participants, partners, structure roles and mandates, relationship to local authorities/policies, activities, mission vision values, practices of communication/promotion, rules e.g., clothing, safety,,)

**Info about the project:**  
 number of participants/trainers, demographics about participants and trainers (age, sex, background, other relevant info....) how old is the project, how many times a week, goals partners funding, where it happens

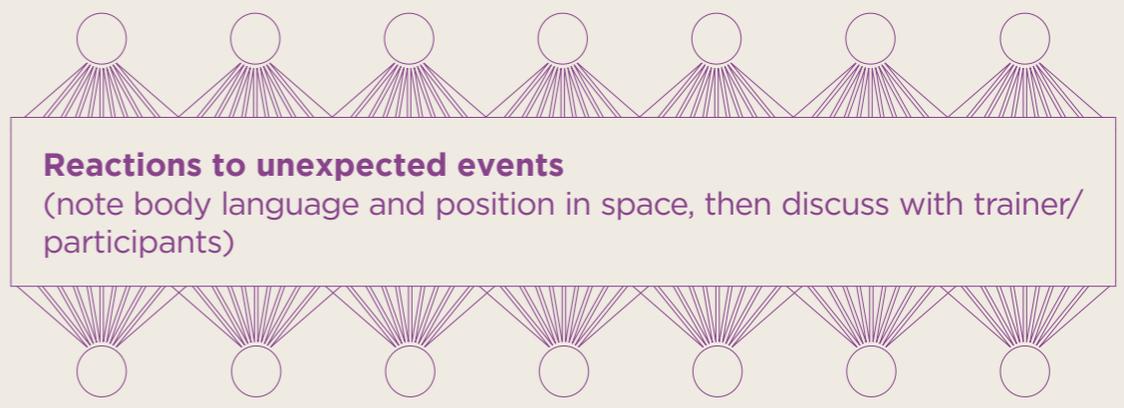
Who is in the workshop and who's not there (note for every observation session)

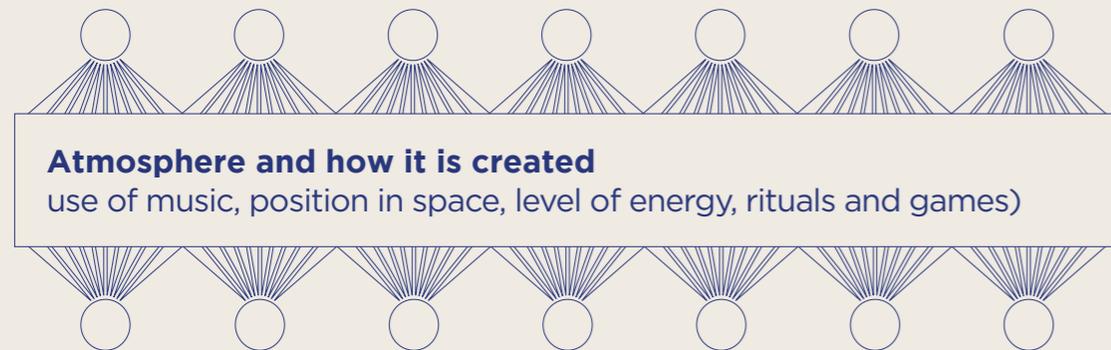
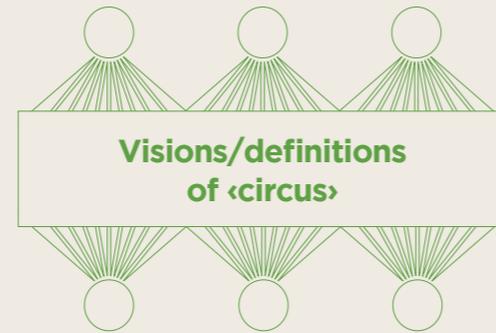
**What to look for**  
 (participant observation, documents of the organisation (mission, vision, values, promo material, forms or subscription, aesthetics of shows, official methods of training and rules ...)

**Info about the context/ neighbourhood:**  
 demographics, history, needs

**Material culture:**  
 objects/props/tools used and relations to objects and interactions through objects objects/props/tools used and relations to objects and interactions through objects

**Structure of the class/workshop**  
 (beginning/core/end...)





**Emotions/feelings**  
of participants and trainers (do not interpret, discuss together!) and how they are managed

**Central values and concepts of trainers,**  
and how they are defined (eg teamwork, trust, risk, collaboration, roles, disciplines, evolution of a group, learning process)

**What to ask for**  
(Interviews, group interviews, focus groups, conversations, feedbacks, discussion of drawings or pictures or videos...)

**focus/priorities/goals of trainers**  
(declared and how they are communicated or not, how they are managed and carried out)

**Notions of (cultural) difference and diversity, assumptions, experiences**

**Practices for evaluation, monitoring, asking and receiving feedback, preparation and planning of classes**



CARAVAN

Rue Picard 3, 1000 Brussels  
Belgium



info@caravancircusnetwork.eu  
Skype caravan.network  
Facebook caravan.circus  
Twitter caravan\_circus  
<https://www.caravancircusnetwork.eu/>



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