BEACON: public library & NGO go cultural & digital with added value for learners and Ostend

1. About BEACON

BEACON combines the elements of an Arts and Social Change project with Life Long Learning and focuses on digital literacy. One could say it is about informal learning with an arts-twist, trying to motivate learners, make them curious and imaginative, ready to discover new horizons (even) in a digital world.

The link with the city as a habitat is omnipresent: the continuous potential threat of the sea, its storms and the element of the flood shape the setting of life in a coastal town.

Within the Department of Cultural Affairs the public library, organizer of the project, functions as a BEACON in town, and links the project to the local authorities and the citizens. Through a public tender the NGO kleinVerhaal was appointed to work out and organize a diverse action plan over a period of two years.

The public library of Ostend is home to BEACON and functions as a meeting point open to all, where people can find answers to their questions, receive feedback and deliver content to shape and create the story of their own town. We invite regulars of the public library as well as new participants to join in and take part.

Beacon is a 'made to measure' project for the public library, its partners, its visitors and the citizens of Ostend.

ACTIONS FOR LEARNERS:

- Thursday rendezvous: Every Thursday morning (except during school holidays) people can come to the public library with any question on computers or digital skills. A teacher and volunteers are there to help them solve the problem. A group of people facing the same difficulties come together and get to know each other, friendships grow and learners that have been coming for a while help along the newcomers. The learners face the obstacles of a digital society step by step and broaden their horizon; they become e-inclusive citizens and put the acquired skills into practice in everyday life.
- Artistic ateliers: During 10 sessions an artist takes along a group of people to explore an art form, they are triggered to find a way to express themselves, use imagination and create. In a first series the artist Bart Gabriels explored photography with the group. He has worked with

peer groups and in other Arts for Change projects. The way the learners think about photography shifts and broadens. In October 2012 there were 10 sessions on sound art with Filip Daniels. The challenge: capture sound of a town along the sea, create sound and record it. In spring 2013 learners explored animation film, this autumn they'll be creating a 'digital newspaper'. During the ateliers the city of Ostend and the waterfront form the setting. Learners enter a world that is unfamiliar, they grow as a group and through art and culture, a sense of belonging and imagination is created. At the end of the series the results are presented and shared with the public.

- IT courses: The IT-courses and the artistic ateliers are linked. All digital skills required to add content or create, in short participate as a citizen in a digital society, are on the agenda: handle with text files and organize maps on a computer, use different media and adapt audiovisual files, share content, discover new applications, but also grow a critical awareness about data on the net. All learners get individual blog space, so they can exercise at their own pace. The teachers stimulate learners and trigger them to put into practice the acquired skills, not only during the course but also in their private environment.

ACTIONS FOR ALL:

- Digital week: Each year various organizations in Flanders try to get people e-included. BEACON installed a 'digital hut' in the library and on the seafront. Learners took on the role of journalists and went off into town. Equipped with a laptop, wifi-connection, a digital camera and a recorder they listen to other citizens and record their stories. Real digital heroes in action.
- Debate: The public library becomes a place where citizens can listen to experts, artists, scientist and each other. On the agenda: life in Ostend, the threat of the flood and how it effects public space and of most of all art; all of this related to the artistic ateliers and the BEACON project. Arne Quinze, Laura Maes, Carl De Keyzer, Raoul Servais were there to share their ideas, worries or dreams with learners, library members and citizens.
- Sharing creations: After 10 weeks of hard work the learners share their creations with the public. A photo exhibition, a collage of sound art, an animation film is presented. The learners have built connectivity through the process and through presenting the results they build connectivity with the local community.

2. Peer groups

BEACON has chosen to work with mixed groups. The ateliers and courses, the debates … are open to everyone. Nevertheless BEACON especially wants to encourage peer groups to participate. The project is presented on the spot to various partners of the library: Open School, Adult reading and writing groups and local organizations.

The following characteristics define the project approach:

- easy access to participate and to express oneself
- informal learning, with the help of warm experts and former learners
- ateliers with artist to stimulate creativity, imagination, connectivity
- a practical approach and a direct link to a theme that is relevant for the local community

3. What does the project hope to accomplish and what has been achieved?

BEACON is a made to measure project for the city of Ostend where digital literacy, participation, creativity, social and e-inclusion meet in a dynamic training program.

We wish that more peer groups come and use the public library more frequently, we hope to meet them during various activities the library organizes, to participate and we wish to trigger them to go digital.

Achieved?

- More peer groups come more frequently to the public library. We've learnt that if you work with them during a longer time within the library walls, those that participated keep coming and introduce family and friends. These things grow slowly and need time, it's never a story of quick wins. The teachers that work from within the library have become real ambassadors, library-believers. The various services offered by the public library are known to the learners and they or their relatives start joining: children's book jury, storytelling hours, workshops during the digital week, a session on poetry-day, …
Once the confidence of a person grows their social network grows too, they start participating within and outside of the library walls.
- Each series of lessons tries to develop a set number of digital skills with the learners. In turn, they are meant to practice at home. Hence the process of digital literacy is not only linked to the course but put into practice in a wide digital environment.
- We trigger the learners to actively take part in the project and relate it to change and the challenges of the city. Courses and ateliers take place outside the library walls, in the city, at the seafront. Learners explore the city and share their own story. They take pictures, record sounds and learn to deal with information objectively. They are triggered to search their own language, dialogue and connectivity grows.

4. How does the project fit in with the strategic goals of the city and the public library ?

The project is linked to the strategic goals of the city and of the cultural department on various domains :

- culture (participation and education) : learners visit exhibitions ('*Moments before the flood'* and '*Cities are like open air museums'*, meet artist (Carl de Keyzer, Arne Quinze, Raoul Servais) and enter into a dialogue with them
- public space : the learners learn about the coastal defense program of the Flemish Community, the planning strategy of the city, they meet engineers and witnesses of the 1953 flood
- education : all courses, ateliers, debates are informal learning, hence they support Life Long Learning
- social : peer groups are encouraged to join through cooperation with various partners (Open School, Vormingplus, local organizations, …)
- civil affairs and communication: the digital skills acquired during the sessions empower people and trigger them to use other digital tools and transfer these tools to a wider digital environment (e-counters, online tax bill, digital communication with local authority).

5. A new and inspiring approach

BEACON is an a-typical project: the combination of artistic ateliers for learners, IT-training, debates with scientists and artists, free IT-support for individuals in the public library, all linked together in one single project sometimes causes confusion. But is a model that works and triggers people to take part actively in the project and contribute to the story of the city. Public libraries face huge challenges and changes. Projects like BEACON might in a way give an answer to our questions and our search in finding a new identity. Those that join the project create, share ideas, knowledge and thoughts, it's not only about taking in information but also about creating and adding information, connecting people, empowerment, participation and culture being a motor to get this launched.

6. How do we share our story with others?

We inform the public about the project via digital as well as print media : distribution of flyers in the public library and other locations in town (social- and welfare centers), on the website of the public library and the city of Ostend (1) , on the website of NGO kleinVerhaal (2) and the project-website (3).

In order to reach peer groups the staff steps directly to partner organizations as Open School, Vormingplus, local photo clubs, … and presents the project to learners. Those interested can enlist immediately. The project is presented at Fin the Saison, the digital week and national library week.

The debates organized within the project are attended by a large and diverse audience and form an ideal base to spread the word and get in touch with other organizations.

The public library of Ostend has had the opportunity to participate in a Grundtvit Learningpartnership. During our visit to Sweden, the project was presented to the public library of Haninge. The partner from Vienna has introduced some elements of BEACON in their courses. Through a Grundtvig assistantship of a Flemish colleague in Marseille, the BEACON project was presented as a 'best practice' to the librarians at the Alcazar.

Learners and citizens have been touched by BEACON, but the project has also touched the public library of Ostend and the NGO kleinVerhaal. It is not merely about acquiring and transferring digital skills in a wider environment for learners. The project contributes to the aims of citizenship and enhances dialogue and connectivity in our local community. Ostend must stay authentic and build on its strengths, we should look to the future whilst drawing on our past. Getting cultural and involving the library is a good start. We hope BEACON may prove useful and inspiring for similar initiatives.

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(1) www.oostende.be/bibliotheek
(2) http://www.kleinverhaal.be/
(3) www.bakenoostende.be

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