
CIRCUS, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND WONDER.

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**In their research, Liza Lauwers, Mieke Gielen and Milena Nowak wonder how to connect circus with experiential learning. It turns out, wonder is key. Like Plato – or was it Socrates – once said:
Wonder is the beginning of Wisdom.**

"No thinking without an open mind. A mind that is always prepared to be amazed. Let us therefore focus on the development of wonder. It is a condition for a wonderful world."



"This is what Caroline Pauwels, Rector of the VUB (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), wrote on June 26, 2019 in her column for De Tijd as a forerunner for her essay 'Ode aan de Verwondering' (Ode to the Wonderment) (Academia Press, 2019).

The power of wonder is exactly what we at Ondersteboven (*Upside Down - Mieke Gielen and Milena Nowak's non-profit organization located in Antwerp, Belgium*), strongly believe in. It blows you away, turns you upside down, brings you that which you didn't think possible, pushes your boundaries, makes you unfold your talents and offers you new possibilities. But how do you work with wonder as a teacher or as a human being? How do you discover that sparkling power and how do you use it? 'Grow

with wonder' is not only the cornerstone in Ondersteboven's mission, but it is also the essence of their research question: *How can we implement wonder as an driver for (experiential) learning?*

In September 2019, Ondersteboven, with support from Erasmus+, organized a training in experiential learning for social-circus teachers from all over Europe, for the second time. A lovely selection of motivated participants came down to the beautiful location at Circus Punt in Sint-Niklaas, Belgium. The training received a new name: Wonder.

Wonder is not a training where we teach how things *have* to be done. Wonder is an active research – a **Wesearch** – into how we can use experiential learning within circus, and how wonderment can find a place in it. Milena and Mieke presented the participants with various circus activities designed to stimulate a powerful development process. Together with the participants, they researched how you under-go this. For example, how carrying and catching can be meaningful experiences that go beyond acrobatics. .

The participants themselves were also invited to reflect on the meaningful elements of their process. Liza Lauwers also came to visit for a few moments to wonder for herself. She illuminates her observations from Wonder in a blog. 'A **wesearcher? Yes Yes yes yess yesssss yeeess! I think I could be that!**' I said, just before asking what they meant. (L. Lauwers, September 5, 2019).

HOW DO WE INTRODUCE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN CIRCUS?

Circus is perfect for gaining a large variety of concrete experiences in a playful manner: juggling, natural movement, falling and being caught, breathing during tense moments, making fun, playing with fire, ... These experiences are beautiful sources of unique learning opportunities, from where experiential learning can begin.

“We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.” (John Dewey)

Experiences themselves are insufficient to be educational. To be able to give meaning to experiences, we need to create space to be sufficiently aware of the way they enter, how they shape us. Inserting an *active review* at appropriate moments creates room for reflection, bodily awareness, so we can share our own experience and listen to those experienced by others. This allows for experiences to become meaningful in the form of small concepts or big ‘aha’-moments.

This more in-depth experience of the circus practice creates a better and more accessible transfer to daily life. We can experiment with these insights in our life as to gain new (successful) experiences. For example, it can help young people with a high vulnerability to keep themselves balanced on the possibly uneven track they find themselves on.

HOW DO WE INTRODUCE CIRCUS IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

Experiential learning as a methodology has a grand tradition in outdoor education. Many of the insights on experiential learning have been developed in that same context. Even though the outdoors and adventure education share some similarities with circus (like the bodily and non-competitive aspect), we do observe some essential differences.

Where working with ‘risk’ is very much connected with adventure education, circus has something that mainly plays to our imagination, to our creativity. ‘Everything you can imagine, is real’. This quote by Pablo Picasso describes the essence. Dare to dream, make the impossible possible, keep amazing ourselves and others, that is our power. Liza wrote in her blog: *As a researcher, I am curious how to work with this sense of wonderment. How can we facilitate being wondered by circus (activities), in the sense that it brings us something new. Because encountering new things that widen our references of thought, is exactly what (experiential) learning is all about. What do we do with our pupils when we see the surprise in their eyes? Do we understand what it means to them? Which new world opens up for them?*

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN PRACTICE

During Wonder, Mieke asks the participants to step away from the group in a straight line, alone, with their back to the group. The idea is that they stop walking in a spot they choose themselves and let themselves fall backward. As soon as the participant stops and falls, the group can leave their spot to walk towards the participant to catch him or her, hopefully in time! Mieke asks them to stop walking as soon as they observe tension in their body.

After the assignment, - nobody got hurt by the way – Mieke asks where the participants felt tension. One feels it in his neck, almost as a warning: be careful! The other didn't feel anything at first, then mostly the eyes on her back: what would the others be thinking? Characteristic of experiential learning is that the learner is the owner of what there is to be learned. For one participant, the learning is a realization that he/she is limited by asking him/herself what the others might be thinking, while for another participant, staying in touch with his desire to be careful is more important. Once we enter the world of experiential learning, we leave behind the type of learning in which the circus teacher tells participants ‘how it is done’ or ‘how it can be done better’. We go towards creating a space where every participant has the opportunity to discover something about themselves.

FROM COMFORT/STRETCH/PANIC TO WONDERMENT

Growth circles are too often used to urge you to try something new, push your boundaries. The 'Edgework' model by Nadler and Luckner (1992) shows that outside of your comfort zone, in your stress zone or learning zone, there is a lot of 'unknown, risky, unpredictable and uncomfortable' terrain. A *Breakthrough* (= stepping out of your comfort zone) can be a success story. You overcome your limiting thoughts like 'I can't do this', 'this isn't good enough' and your fears, which makes you grow as a person.

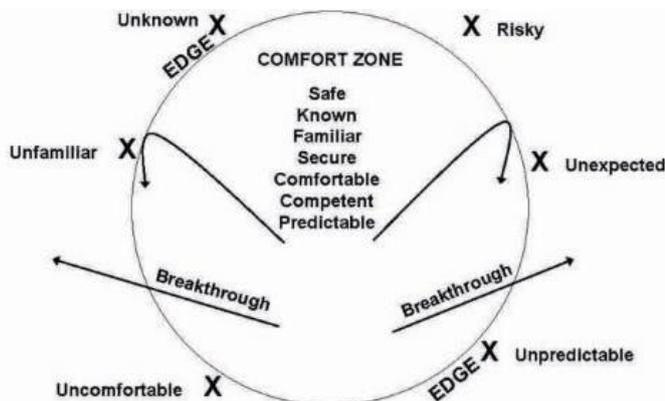
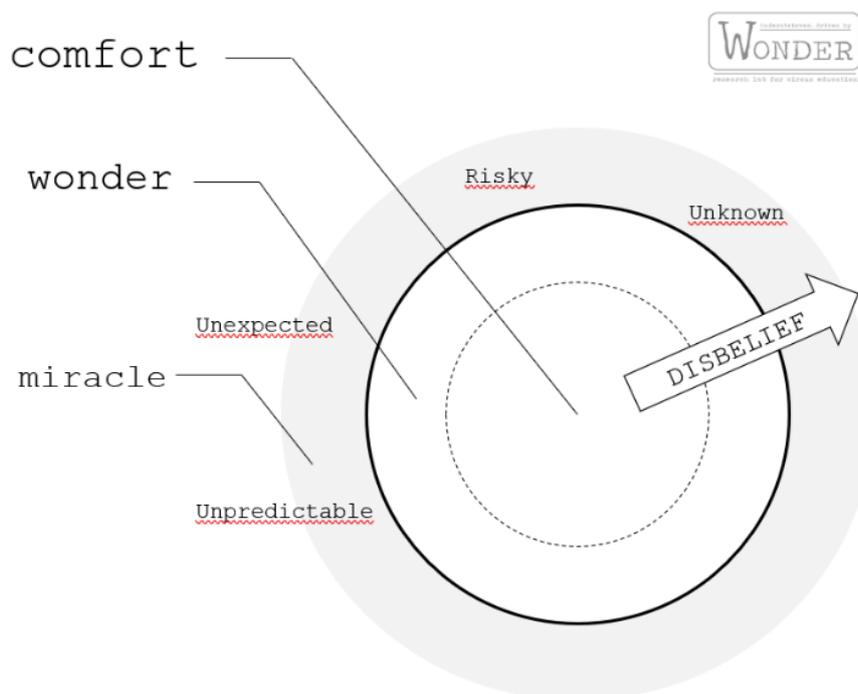


Figure 2. The 'Edgework' model (Nadler and Luckner, 1992).

Within our research, we now wonder: what prompts you to take the chance of a *Breakthrough*? Could that be wonderment? And how can we develop the growth circles into something that integrates wonderment? Our findings have led to a new model.

We renamed the zone around the comfort zone 'Wonder'. Wonder has various meanings that are all applicable. As a verb: 'be curious to know something'. As a noun: 'a feeling of surprised mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar or inexplicable.'



(L. LAUWERS, 2019)

SOURCES

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Ondersteboven (non-profit) is a growing center of expertise where educational circus programs are being developed, with the goal to make people grow with wonder. . We offer workshops and trainings with play and movement as core elements. Founders are Mieke Gielen and Milena Nowak.

Milena has extensive professional experience in guiding varied groups, both as circus teacher at Ell Circo D'ell Fuego (ECDF) and as youth worker and coach in various organizations. Her approach is no-nonsense and a little nuts, with an intense love for play and profundity.

Mieke obtained a master's degree in PE and specialized in circus afterwards. Her deepening of experiential learning (via NATURE vzw and the UCLL) was the start of the collaboration with Milena through Ondersteboven. Under the Californian sun, she is currently working on the project behind the scenes. Wesearcher

Liza Lauwers has a degree in social geography, worked at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and HoGent as researcher and came into contact with the postgraduate studies of Adventure Education through her passion for rock climbing. She now works at NATURE vzw, is visiting lecturer in group dynamics at Odisee Hogeschool and works as freelancer for Outward Bound. In her free time, she took circus classes at ECDF for many years.

Curious about Ondersteboven and project Wonder?

Visit www.onderste-boven.be

HOW CAN WONDERMENT BE USED FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND LEARNING?

1. BROADEN YOUR VISION

Something we try to keep developing in our circus activities. It is the unrestrained view of blissful ignorance; we learn to take another look at something that was set. This can mean that a six-year-old redefines the cloth used in juggling class as a little ghost that floats around, or the vulnerable youngster who opens up and sees he *can* trust his peers, but also the crazy circus collective that wows their audience while skiing through their tent.

'What does wonderment do? She bursts through the predictability of the expected. With wonderment starts questioning, searching, falling and getting back up, finding what you didn't even know you were looking for.' (Ode aan de verwondering, p.14)

2. SURPRISE YOURSELF

Opening ourselves up to wonderment actually equals leaving our comfort zone (the expected, the known, the prepared). And when we do that, we make a counter-movement, go against our belief that it is impossible and/or dangerous (disbelief), and dive into the unforeseen and unpredictable. Those who ended up in a circus class at some point in their lives might know the point where you realize you are doing something you would never do anywhere else. Performing in a dress while in 'real-life' you always wear pants for example.

3. LET YOURSELF BE SHAKEN UP

"We shouldn't romanticize wonderment. Being amazed can be rather painful; it might not be in the phase of actual wonderment itself, but the possible consequences of it. 'Wonderment is a crisis', writes philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven. And a crisis is a moment of truth. What was thought to be usual, normal, turns out to be unusual, and that has its consequences: things you were always very sure about, turn out not to be true; what was fixed now falters." (Ode aan de verwondering, p.18)

4. THE CHOICE IS YOURS

The crisis makes us face a personal choice, the moment of truth. We can choose to put aside the sensation and continue our daily business, pretending it was exactly as we expected, it was useless, it doesn't bring in anything, ... and as a result we suppress wonderment. Or we are amazed. We are surprised that it's different, different than expected. We broaden our vision, see new perspectives and take those with us. As a result, we can accept the securities we have can be different. That way, we learn to be amazed.

5. FROM WONDERMENT TO MAGIC

Against our own knowledge, in circus, without much explanation, we learn to set off from our wonderment that everything can be different. Isn't that magical?! And indispensable, in a society that leans more towards the opposite, to the predictable, to indifference, and to fear of the unknown. Let us, therefore, start learning to grow from wonderment. Or as we like to formulate it:

Say yes to wonder.