

SLAMIT in Ennis, Ireland

By Bent Rasmussen, editor of “SKOLEBIBLIOTEKET”, the Journal of Danish School Librarians

The SLAMIT conference in Ennis, Ireland, from 5-10 November 2007, was a well-organised, fruitful and exciting conference. Dr. Kyran Kennedy, Director of the Clare Education Centre in Ennis, welcomed delegates to Ennis in a warm, knowledgeable and humorous way, and did everything possible thereafter to be a good host.

It was then the turn of the conference organisers, Per Fagerland from Karmøy, Norway, and Gert Larsen, Director of the Pædagogisk Center in Albertslund, Denmark, to welcome the 55 participants from 13 European countries. SLAMIT stands for School Libraries As Multimedia Learning centres In-service Training.

The following municipalities are partners in the project: Karmøy, Norway, Albertslund, Denmark, Gosport, United Kingdom, Humpolec, Czech Republic, Ennis, Ireland, Alytus, Lithuania, Aviles, Spain and Almada, Portugal.

Gert Larsen presented participants with “six crucial questions facing the development of the school library in the context of the general development of the school and insight into the newest methods of learning and learning styles”. These also represent the general philosophy behind the SLAMIT projects – and are enough to get one thinking:

- How can the school library create a space for learning where pupils have access to many different religious, ethnic and cultural understandings, so that different points of view can be debated, creating conditions for life in a democratic society?
- How can the school library consider individual styles of learning and ensure that each child is supported to work actively and creatively with class content at the school?
- How can the school library contribute to pupils becoming active producers of knowledge, and not only consumers of information, so that they make new discoveries and develop confidence with various forms of expression?
- How can the school library ensure that pupils have the opportunity to develop their ability to search, develop and pass on information so that they gain confidence in handling information, learning to work critically and problem-solving?
- How can the school library ensure that pupils have access to media which reflects the culture of children and young people today?
- How can the school library ensure that pupils get an opportunity to appreciate the significance of imaginative literature as a creator of stories and a moulder of images?”

The course objectives

- Inform about the SLAM and GrandSLAM projects.
- Demonstrate and share best practices between SLAM/GrandSLAM partners and the course participants.
- Foster a sense of community among school librarians in all parts of Europe.
- Exchange professional and cultural experiences among course participants.
- Encourage course participants to include the European/international dimension in their future projects and actions plans for their local school libraries.
- Provide inspiration for individual or team based reflective projects and action plans undertaken by the course participants – with particular emphasis on developing action plans for implementation within home schools at the conference in partnership with experienced mentors.

While listening to the presenters and speaking to people it was very clear that the SLAMIT projects have developed the new approach to learning, shifting focus from teaching to learning. Joao Procencá, a presenter from Portugal, even talked about developing the school library "in the Grand Slam way". Another presenter quoted USA's First Lady, Laura Bush, who is a former school librarian: "*School Libraries Matter! School Libraries help teachers teach and children learn.*"

It is also interesting to observe that the way people establish and develop school libraries in the various European countries today is not necessarily the same as in the past. You do not necessarily have to start at point A and move towards point B, as people would, for example, in Denmark. Today, people might actually start at point B – or skip points A and B altogether. Or they might focus on a relatively narrow spectrum of the usual school library areas/services. This is primarily due to technological advances. You no longer need to have a huge collection of books/teaching materials to be able to establish a new school library/learning centre. A school library is not a place, but an idea! This point was emphasised by several people during the conference. The example from Lithuania (see below) is a good illustration of how to begin developing a learning centre.

The Irish school system

It is a tradition at the SLAMIT conference that the host country has an opportunity to talk about their country's school system. This was done by Dr. Kyran Kennedy, Director of Clare Education Centre. There are 20 such centres in Ireland, and Dr. Kennedy explained that the current school system is based on legislation from 1998.

It is interesting how consistently people talk about things like school, school libraries, teaching and school development across all of Europe: "learning is a lifelong process..., it's about exploiting each pupil's full potential so that they can become full members of society..., focus on learning..., focus on leadership", etc.

In Ireland, children may start school at four years of age, but many only start when they turn five. Children *must* start school by the age of six, and continue until age 15, but most continue until they are 18 years old.

After eight years of primary school, pupils study for up to a further six years in ordinary private or vocational schools, government run comprehensive schools or community schools. Some of the schools divide these years into two levels – three years of junior school and two years of senior school.

Pupils have 183 school days per year in primary school, and 167 school days in post primary school, with an average of 22 tuition periods per week.

The schools are managed in a variety of ways, but the content of the teaching is basically the same. Each school has a Board of Management.

Teaching salaries: from 29,534 to 57,403 EURO per year – with various supplements.

Ennis has a focus on leadership that is divided into a number of layers:

- Leadership development
- Primary and post-primary leaders
- Principals
- Deputy principals
- Assistant principals
- Acting principals
- Aspiring principals

Dr. Kennedy noted that the leadership development programme has been very successful, and particularly the “aspiring principals”!

The Irish language

English is the first language for the majority of Irish. A minority group speaks Irish as their first language, particularly in the “Gaeltacht” regions in the west and southwest. A number of people – possibly up to a third of the population – use Irish to some extent in daily life. We were billeted by a sixth grade class at Scoil Christ RT (www.criostri.com), but no-one here spoke Irish at home.

Irish is Ireland’s first official language, with English as the second, but English is much more frequently used in politics and administration, and in the media. However, Irish radio has been broadcast since 1972, and Irish television from 1996. English is used for teaching at all levels, but Irish is taught as a compulsory subject in primary school and in youth education courses. Teachers are required to master Irish in order to be able to teach!

In Irish, the language is called Gaeilge (Gaelic) – as in the ‘Gaelic League’, a movement to resurrect the Irish language, founded in 1893.

Joao Proencá, Portugal

Joao Proencá did a presentation on how he had developed his school library in “the Grand Slam way” from 2001 to the present day. His school library supports 650 pupils aged between six and 16, and work is done in teams. They had succeeded in getting all the teachers involved in the work in a good (school library) way. A small team of four people organise the school library activities in relation to an action plan and then evaluate the work afterwards.

Joao Proencá used an incisive expression regarding his role as school librarian: “in reality I am a kind of school library trainer!”

Joao Proencá felt three things were important when developing a school library into a learning centre:

- learning to use information technology
- learning good reading habits
- learning to search

Joao Proencá emphasised that learning is more than learning by listening to information produced by others. Learning is also the ability to obtain information and communicate knowledge to others. A school library is an idea, and he felt the entire school should be one big learning centre.

Joao Proencá's school is working intensively to develop teachers' work in relation to the curriculum and the pupils / class. He felt that school libraries or learning centres do not arise by chance, even though one of Professor Ross Todd's "10 commandments" of learning (no. 7) states that much learning happens by chance. Developing a school library into a learning centre requires a plan! The school library – and school librarian – must serve as a guide. Joao Proencá concluded by saying that resources are naturally important, but the most important thing is what we do with them!

A wonderful and engaging presentation, and a good example of the fact that we largely start from whatever position we find ourselves in. A good example, also, of the way that rapid technological development is a major contributor to changes in the way (and especially the speed at which) school libraries are being developed.

See Joao Proencá's "plan of action" at: www.slमित.org

Pat Nixon

Pat Nixon from Great Britain, a librarian and specialist in Information Literacy at St. Vincent College, started with a clear definition of what Information Literacy is:

"Information Literacy encompasses knowledge of one's information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand; it is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the Information Society, and is part of the basic human right of lifelong learning." (The Prague Declaration, 2003)

She emphasised the basic point that "the journey is more important than the destination".

She presented a very detailed plan of how they promote Information Literacy at St. Vincent College. The focus is on "Identifying and Searching":

- Recognising when information is needed – and understanding why
- Being able to identify what information is needed, understanding the question, highlighting key terms
- Being able to search effectively for the information...
- Being able to locate the information...

Pat Nixon also talked about "Evaluating and Communicating Information", with an emphasis on:

- Being able to evaluate the source...
- Communicating the information effectively...
- Reviewing the process...

The actual teaching in Information Literacy takes place through:

- Induction sessions
- Group information skills sessions
- Research sessions for specific assignments
- Individual one-to-one

This approach gives pupils at St. Vincent College a very thorough introduction to Information Literacy at a high level.

You can see Pat Nixon's slides on "British Education" and further explanation of the above four points at: www.slमित.org

Professor Ross Todd

Professor Ross Todd's presentation was a very constructive and thought-provoking experience. Shortly after returning home from the conference, Kirsten Plum Tholle, a school library consultant in Lyngby-Taarbæk Municipality in Denmark, wrote an article in "SKOLEBIBLIOTEKET", the Journal of Danish School Librarians, (No. 10-2007), entitled "Give them meaningful questions to answer!" She wrote:

"Meeting a dedicated researcher specialising in learning and school libraries, and a gathering of school librarians and other education professionals from all over Europe left me with a lot to think about.

Finally I saw him standing there, the friendly, smiling man who was my main reason for being in Ireland. His PowerPoint slides were ready, my pencil was sharpened, and the rows behind me were filled with expectant school librarians from many other European countries. Everyone had come to hear Professor Ross Todd.

Professor Todd has researched for many years into the effects of the school library, and what pupils learn in or through their school library. We were now about to hear the results of his research and his views on what school librarians should be doing in the future in relation to teaching and learning activities associated with the school library.

The title of his presentation was: *The preferred future of school libraries. Engaging learners in the information-to-knowledge experience.*

Translated into our daily work: How do we give pupils the opportunity to move from obtaining information, to knowledge. How do pupils create knowledge which they can use in their ongoing learning?

Put briefly: why do schools need a school library? An interesting question that we should all ask ourselves occasionally.

Are pupils learning the right things?

It took only a few slides before we reached Professor Todd's main agenda. He is not asking whether or not schools should have a school library. But he is in some doubt as to whether we are teaching pupils the right things in our libraries. His key question was: 'why do we have a school library?' And the answer was given promptly in the form of a quotation: '*So pupils can find the "material" they need*'. This was the answer he received when he asked school librarians.

Now the plot had been introduced.

Processor Todd does not believe that teaching pupils to search for information, to localise more and more facts, is the real value of a school library. He believes the value lies in teaching pupils what

they should use the discovered information for. After many years at the blackboard, this observation was no surprise to me. Project assignments, and the way of working derived from them, have not come about automatically. So what is new? Where is the need for the school library in all this?

Super users of online networking

The next few slides were about our pupils and their use of the Net, about 'being online'. We were presented with the results of a number of US studies showing that youths aged between 12 and 17 can be considered super users of online networking. For example, one of the results showed that 55 per cent of this group were online daily in a network such as Facebook, YouTube, etc. It is possible at these sites to chat with online friends, flirt, publish a profile or images, or even have an identity – an avatar – in the virtual Web 2.0 world.

Professor Todd described a group of these youths in a very engaging way as *online nonconformists* – those who step outside the rules, who always have the latest features, who download and experiment. They are often willing to pass on their skills. They possess great digital skills. We are no longer talking about teenagers, but 'screenagers'.

Youths are going outside school and learning from the Net. They do not see school as the place where you learn, get new ideas, and try out new possibilities. They are advanced media users who have their own blog, have done a podcast, uploaded images to the Net, or worked with others to start a website – but often only in their spare time.

The point of no return

What role does the school library have in this? At this point in the proceedings I am a bit shaken, and have lots of questions. How do I respond – as a school librarian – to this online life, to these universes? Do we as a school see the potential in this Web existence that is developing among Danish youths? Are we taking the pupils' online world seriously?

We have now reached the point of no return in the presentation. Various examples from the research have been introduced, and it is time to look for some solutions. I sit and wait in anticipation. There are major things in play, not just an addition – an extra work area.

No, Professor Todd is talking about redefining the school library. We need to approach it from a new angle. The place where pupils develop their skills in acquiring knowledge. A complex place where investigations take place. A place where conclusions are drawn on the basis of investigations. Gathering information is just the first step. The next step is to acquire knowledge – construct new knowledge. How can the school library help support the skill of getting each pupil to construct new knowledge? Transferring text/information from the Net into a project does not give new knowledge to the individual, it only teaches them how to cut-and-paste.

Engage pupils in real world problems!

The solution, not surprisingly, is right in front of us. Let the pupils use the tools they get to know in their spare time. The school library has to integrate the form of communication that is characteristic for the way youths use media. The challenge for us is to engage pupils in the real world's problems – not a "pretend world". They are already involved in debates on the Net. Why not let them construct arguments, find conclusions, ask new questions, or engage them in a conflict? The school library should be the place where they meet conflicts. Instead of the place where facts are gathered. They are just background knowledge.

The presentation is nearing its end. We are sitting in our seats with many images of the youths, and what we usually think about what is at the heart of school. Has it gotten out of step? Have we forgotten how workshops arose and were developed, how project work is more than just an investigation?

Transforming facts into meaningful knowledge

Professor Todd closes by yet again emphasising that of course it is important to have access to information, but getting help to construct new knowledge about the subject is more important – transforming facts into meaningful knowledge for the individual. That is learning.

I need to go home and create a blog, look a bit more closely at YouTube, and why not create a new identity in Second Life?”

See all of Professor Todd’s slides at www.slamit.org

Thank you for seeing me, teacher!

Andreas Holvik, from Norway, spoke clearly and straight to my heart. He placed school and teaching in a global perspective in an excellent, personal way, and immediately highlighted the key problem. He said there was a mismatch between our 20th century schools and our 21st century pupils.

According to Andreas Holvik, the solution is to learn, unlearn, and re-learn, and teaching needs to be about:

- Responsibility
- Rights
- Relationships
- Participation
- Empowerment

With a picture of his grandchild on the screen, Andreas Holvik presented what he believes will become the new and important skills:

- Basic skills
- Social skills
- Creativity
- Cooperation
- Learning to learn

He emphasised that learning is something we do – not something that is done to us – and used Vygotsky’s ”learning needs pyramid” as an example:

Lecture
Reading
Audio-Visual
Demonstration
Discussion Group
Practice by Doing
Student teaching – use of learning

Like the food pyramid, it indicates that all ingredients are important, but we need to have a lot of what is at the base of the pyramid and less of what is at the top!

Andreas Holvik also focused on learning styles and was very interested in Portfolio as an evaluation method. He also appealed for clear teacher leadership in the classroom and recounted two wonderful teacher stories. The first was about his own biology teacher who contributed to his development of a lifelong interest in ornithology. The second was a story about a pupil who, without raising their hand, was asked about something, answered elaborately and correctly, and concluded by saying: “Thank you for seeing me, teacher!”

It reminds me of a sentence Marshal B. Rosenberg (inventor of non-violent communication) said at a seminar in Vejle, Denmark. The words were, “see me beautiful!”, and they make it very difficult to be angry at others for very long.

Andreas Holvik believes that in future, teachers will need to focus on the following important “ingredients” in the classroom:

- Still teach
- Facilitate learning
- Guide more than before
- Be a leader of the class
- Have competence and different methods and strategies
- Know the importance of building relationships
- Competence in learning styles
- Operate in a new learning environment

He added that the fact that we have a certain “control capacity”, are able to engage in close (teamwork) relationships with others, and find meaning and purpose in what we do, are vitally important for our lives as pupils, teachers and people.

Finally, Andreas Holvik highlighted the great importance of the modern teacher with a quote from Psychiatrist, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961):

“An understanding heart is everything in a teacher and cannot be esteemed highly enough. One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teacher but with gratitude to those who touched our human feeling. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.”

The Lithuania way

The Alytus Youth Centre in Vilnius is a good example of the fact that you simply start somewhere. You do not have to have built up your entire arsenal before you can develop a new and modern element in a modern learning centre. Tatjana Zacharove spoke about development in a place where youths can work with film, and showed some great examples of productions.

Workshop

A workshop based on the “café method”, run by Gert Larsen and Marianne Klöcker, a school library consultant, from Albertslund, Denmark, gave participants plenty of opportunity to talk, inspire each other, exchange ideas, and cross swords, etc. I am confident it also provided some contact opportunities which can subsequently be used in creative ways in the ongoing work.

Golden rules

Karmøy municipality in Norway has initiated an impressive array of projects within the last 10-12 years. They have been involved in a total of 44 projects since they started focusing on international

and global themes in their teaching. It is particularly striking, from my point of view, that a small municipality, almost out in the Atlantic ocean, in a country that is not a member of the EU, was able to initiate such a large number of projects. They have also been successful in inspiring a great many other people in Norway to focus on the international dimension in their teaching. Respect!

John Rullestad is the man, who along with other good people, has kick-started things in Karmøy (Europe!), and gained some experiences which he happily shares with others. His presentation at the end of the conference was about “golden rules” in international work, on giving attention to things like:

- School structure
- Curriculums
- Holidays
- Exam periods
- Local IT support training
- At least two people from each school being involved
- Testing and training in the email system
- Good planning
- Responding quickly to emails
- All questions are important
- Keep each other informed
- Be diplomatic
- KISS = Keep It Small and Simple
- Remember ”Netiquette”!

Remember to look at: <http://ec.europa.eu.education/trainingbase>

John Rullestad’s introduction to working with the international dimension in teaching, and what opportunities are available in the EU programmes, was the best and clearest introduction I have ever heard. Thank you!

Marketplace was a brilliant idea

A marketplace was organised for the second evening in Ennis. It was quite impressive what the countries had managed to create in 2-3 hours. There were lovely displays, ideas for teaching, descriptions of teaching processes, beautiful pictures from the various countries, characteristic products – even tasting, etc. It provided a unique opportunity to “get together”, which participants took advantage of and profited from during the rest of the conference.

Nature trip

On the second last day of the conference, participants went on a lovely nature trip to the Irish west coast, and visited the spectacular and breathtaking Cliffs of Moher. An almost brand new visitor centre augmented the experience with beautiful still images and videos on a fantastic big screen, for example, showing marine birds diving for food in the sea. It was impressive and beautiful! We also drove through endless limestone regions where the coach driver/guide said there was not enough soil to be buried in, no trees tall enough to hang yourself in, and not enough water to drown in. Great trip!

We also experienced Irish music and dancing at an evening concert arranged especially for conference participants. It was also wonderful!

What have you gained from the conference?

The final day of the conference focused on evaluation and goodbyes. I asked Johanna Hirmasto from Mankkaanpuro School in Espoo, Finland – principal, teacher and school librarian in one person – what she had gained from the conference:

“I am taking home lots of good contacts, lots of ideas for books on pedagogics to read, and on developing the school library, and I need to do further study on learning styles when I get home. I have been very satisfied with the conference!”

I put the same question to Margarita Gutiérrez Valdés, Teacher Adviser from Centro De Formacion e Innovacion Del Profesorado in Valladolid, Spain:

“I have experienced a great atmosphere and a conference that was very well organised. Some of the presentations could have been at a slightly higher level, but Ross Todd was very interesting to listen to.”

I had the good fortune of eating dinner at the same table as Margarita Gutiérrez Valdés during the first evening in Ennis. During our conversation she expressed concern about preserving Spanish as the Spanish language, due to the various Spanish dialects. She said, ‘we must not forget the national Spanish’. She stressed that it was important to hold on to.

Stuart David Parker, Portsmouth College, UK, Additional Support Co-ordinator:

“My eyes have been opened to many things. I now know that we can do lots of things even better. Standing still today is the same as going backwards, we must move forward.”

The UK has a very tight curriculum. Does that make it difficult to include the international dimension in teaching?

“Yes, that’s right, but it is still important to prepare what we do. We have to find time for it. That is certainly our intention. It sometimes looks impossible, but we are working on it and for it.”

Are you satisfied with the conference?

“I wouldn’t use the word satisfied, because I am much more than satisfied. I am astonished and amused!”

Close

- In relation to the Course Objectives, a great job was done informing people about SLAM and Grand SLAM projects (point 1)
- a lot of experiences and best practices were exchanged between countries/schools (point 2)
- it is my clear impression that we successfully established fellowship between school librarians/teachers in the project and between participants (point 3)
- participants successfully exchanged positive cultural and professional experiences (point 4)
- participants have gained courage to get started on implementing the international dimension in their teaching (point 5)
- it is also my clear impression that in future, participants will initiate projects in their schools, participate in courses and conferences, and be able to make use of each other across the network as mentors or coaches (point 6)

It has been a great and interesting experience to be a “fly on the wall” at this exciting conference in Ennis, Ireland. Thank you!