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Toys for Children's Rehabilitation

An interview with two contributors of the UNESCO Creative Workshops

On the plane to Armenia... on the way to the a UNESCO Creative Workshop... thinking; *"what can I really do for them, they must clearly have other needs than me coming there to make them some new toys"*.

After listening to the stories of the workshops it clearly becomes apparent that the rich experience both for the children and the participants of the workshop, the doubts and questions of "what can I do?", quickly fade. The UNESCO Creative Workshops are playing an important role and attention to the children with disabilities and needs.

I meet Italian Isabella Steffan, tutor of several workshops and co-organizer of a workshop held in Italy and German Myriel Milicevic, a first time participant to a recent workshop held in Armenia.

Location: Ms. Steffan Studio, Milan. Time: 18:30, December 10th 2006



Q. *Isabella, begin with telling me your story... How did you get involved in the UNESCO Creative Workshops?*

A. I got involved in 1998 because of an innovation program that was granted money by the [European Commission](#) to take such initiatives. At that time there were three different countries involved being Sweden, Great Britain and Italy, in total three different workshops, which was organized by Siegfried Zoels in Germany. The Germans was rather used to have such kind of workshops, starting about 20 years earlier merited by Siegfried Zoels.

The first workshop of that kind was realized in 1980 by Siegfried – as a part of a further educational system for industrial designers of east Germany. By involving and spreading the concept of the workshops we tried to improve and adjust the method that they had been evolving from East Germany before the Berlin Wall went down in 1989. It was in the occasion of the first Italian workshop we introduced tutors, being participants from previous workshops, as well as experts regarding needs of children with disabilities.

Q. *Was UNESCO involved already at that time in the workshops or has the collaboration been something that has evolved later?*

A. It was a little bit later that they got involved. It started as a UNESCO-Workshop in September 1990 as the last [UNESCO](#) activity of the [GDR](#) / East Germany. The workshop happened at [Bauhaus Dessau](#) 2 weeks before the unification of Germany.

That workshop was the GDR-contribution of the UN World Decade of Cultural Development in 1988-1997. After 1990 the UNESCO Commission of Western-Germany evaluated the GDR-projects and accepted the workshops. We continued in 1993 with the 2nd UNESCO-Workshop “Toys for Children’s Rehabilitation” in Potsdam/Germany and from 1995 the UNESCO-Workshop has taken place every year.



Q. *What is the goal and reason behind the UNESCO Creative Workshops?*

A. The main objective and theme is; **Toys for children's rehabilitation.** The key method is working together with people from all over the world, for people with disabilities, realizing designs for them. We are talking about toys and the target being the experts on the subject; the children. The toys that are in the market are not always good for children with special needs and are not treated as therapeutical toys. The nice things of such workshops are; working together with the child, and the possibility to test your results, and to adjust to their needs. The fact that you have an instant feedback from a child, who you observe playing with your toy, does become very valuable. Still, on the other hand, it is very easy with children, when they are the target group, as they respond very impulsively.

Q. *What is the program of a typical workshop?*

A. All the workshops are 15 days long. The participants are far from their homes, their everyday lives and where they are asked to focus only on this specific topic. The group and the participants are all carefully selected with the goal in mind to compose a very diverse set of expertise. Also the composition of age is as important as their backgrounds and of course their different nationalities. With such a mixed group it is important to have the tutor. Our tutors are in charge leading the group and guide the participants during the workshops.

Every workshop starts with a 2-day seminar or similar where we receive information about the needs, the different kinds of disabilities that the children of that specific workshop have. We attempt from the beginning to help the participants to forget everything, to start with clean minds.



Q. *When observing the children, do you give them special assignments?*

A. No, it is more the other way around. We don't interfere. We simply observe their daily routine but then we are given different guidelines from the tutors and the seminar that help to understand what to draw from your observations and how to transform it into a toy in the end.

Q. *So, basically the user experience is the essential element of the workshops?*

A. Yes, that is the important ingredient in the method that the workshops are using. The method is to have near to 20 people coming from different countries, with different backgrounds and expertise being for example; architects, teachers, therapists, to work together around the same topic, which is "children rehabilitation".



Q. *When observing the children do you work with very specific disabilities and therefore observing one child per participant or do you look at a larger group of children to give guidelines for all the designs?*

A. It depends. In Sweden we focused only on one child per participant and later we worked with a group of children. It is rather difficult to observe only one child and not be able to interact with whereas in a group you receive more stimulation to transform your observations. In Armenia we worked in-group of about four people each with whom you would visit four different places where the observations were all filtered through the therapists, as there was a language problem. Yet, you would still be able to observe and comprehend the problems and chose which kind of complication to focus on from a single child or from the whole group of children.



Q. *The last workshop you both participated in were in Armenia. Yet, countries like Sweden and Armenia are very different. Does it show in the children's disabilities and perhaps in the cultural needs?*

A. Actually no, there hasn't been a notion of differences as such. Sweden was a very rich country compared to Armenia, but the place we visited we didn't find many toys, which in that perspective was unexpected. But that specific place we went to might have been chosen for that exact reason. We are not designing toys for the hosting country that we visit. We get inspiration from listening to the regarded culture, their tales, but all of this is mostly happening in the seminar in the first few days of the workshop.



Q. *The extent of the disabilities are mostly the same or do the children have very different problems?*

A. The disabilities and problems are very different. In Armenia we worked with children with leukemia, which mentally, of course, are completely normal but have a lot of other problems to consider whereas other children are born with disabilities such as the Down's syndrome and it is a completely different issue to deal with. So, yes the disabilities are very diverse from child to child.

For example one workshop in Great Britain was focusing on blind people, where we worked on a campus where the blind children were living. Also in Italy there has been a focus on blind children, with also autistic and Down children. In Sweden we were meet children of very severe disabilities, which is always a very difficult and challenging experience.



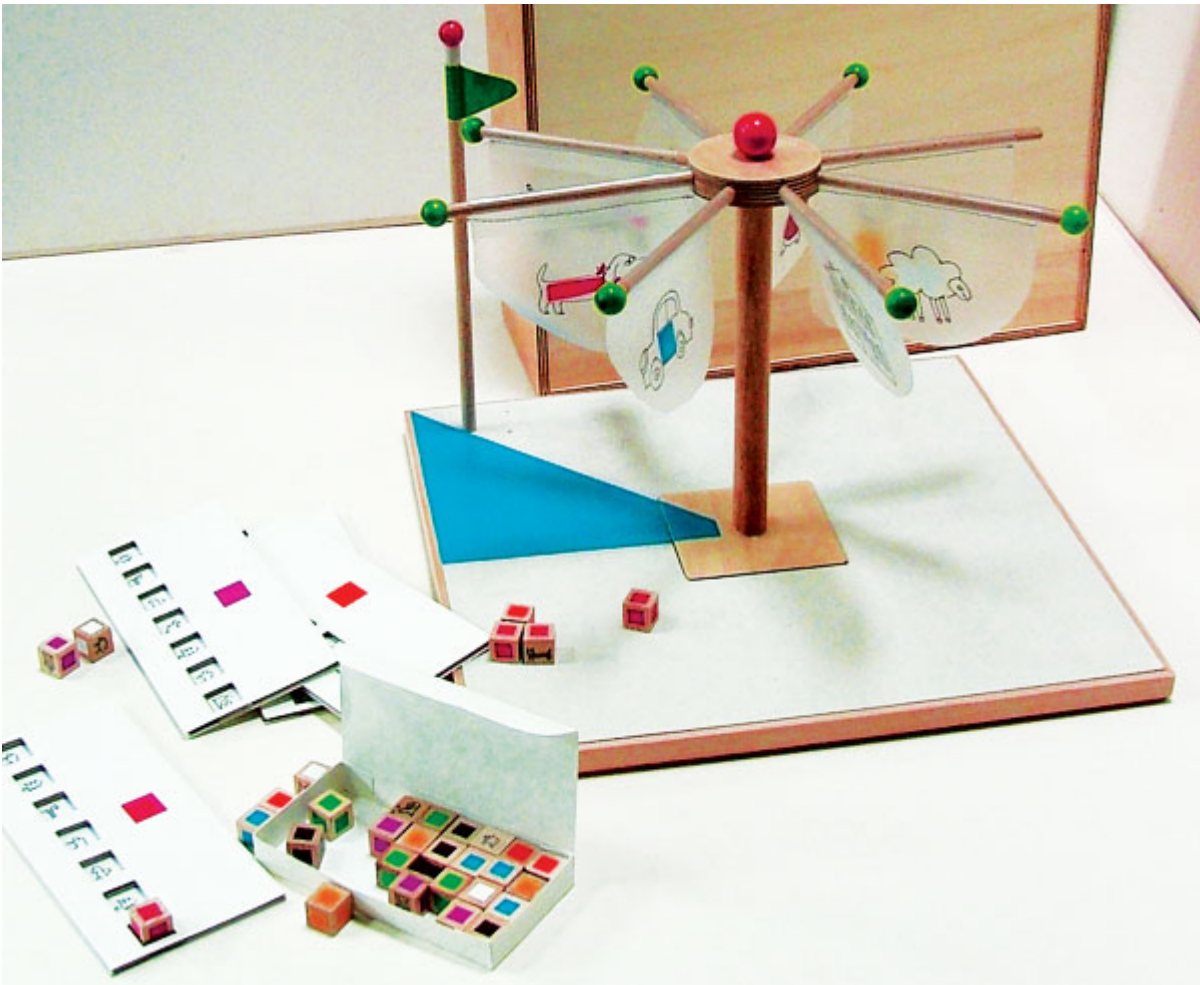
Q. *For a person not used to be around disabled children it often leaves a big impression. How are the participants managing the emotional impact?*

A. Right, sometimes it is a difficult moment to face and to understand how to comprehend. We have had some participants that in some extent tried to avoid being confronted with the disabled children and seeking to work with the children that may have difficulties of some other sort but who are not disabled. Especially the female participants tend to start to cry because of the emotional stress of seeing this big need of help and the time limit that you are put under to give your contribution.

Q. *Are some of the toys being developed during these two intense weeks, being produced and able to make the jump into the industrial world?*

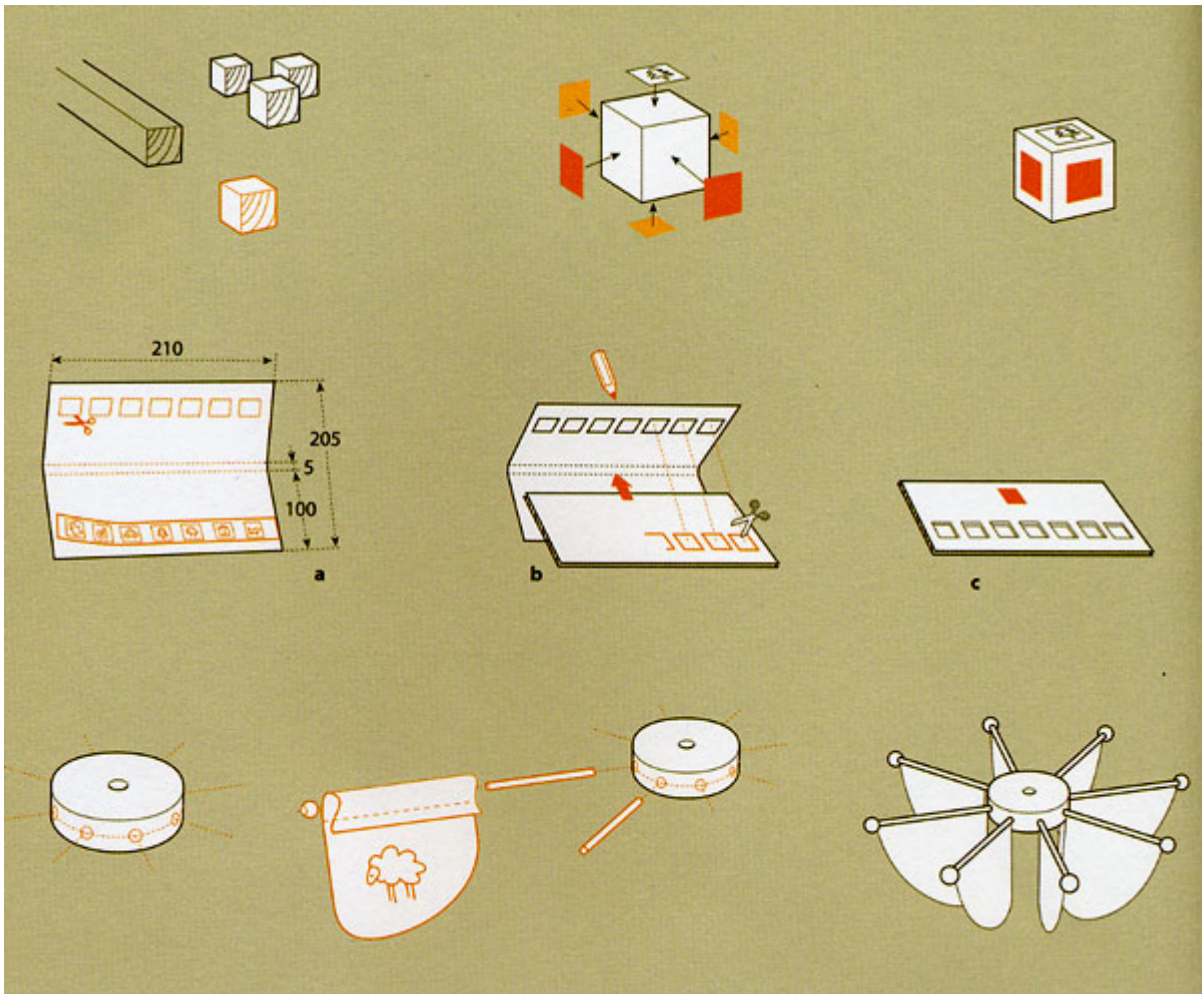
A. In the last days of the workshop there is always a test period and a final exhibition. Then after the workshop is completed the tutors meet and go through the toys to select those than can be

brought further. We conclude two areas; what can be produced for industrial purposes but also, and most importantly, which toys can be re-made easily by the disabled themselves.



Q. *How do you communicate all this information you gather out to people?*

A. This is a lack that we are working on now. There are some materials in forms of book and booklets but they are all in German. We are currently setting up a website from where parents to disables children, as well as parents in general, can gather information. Here we will have downloadable documents that guide you, how to make the toys.



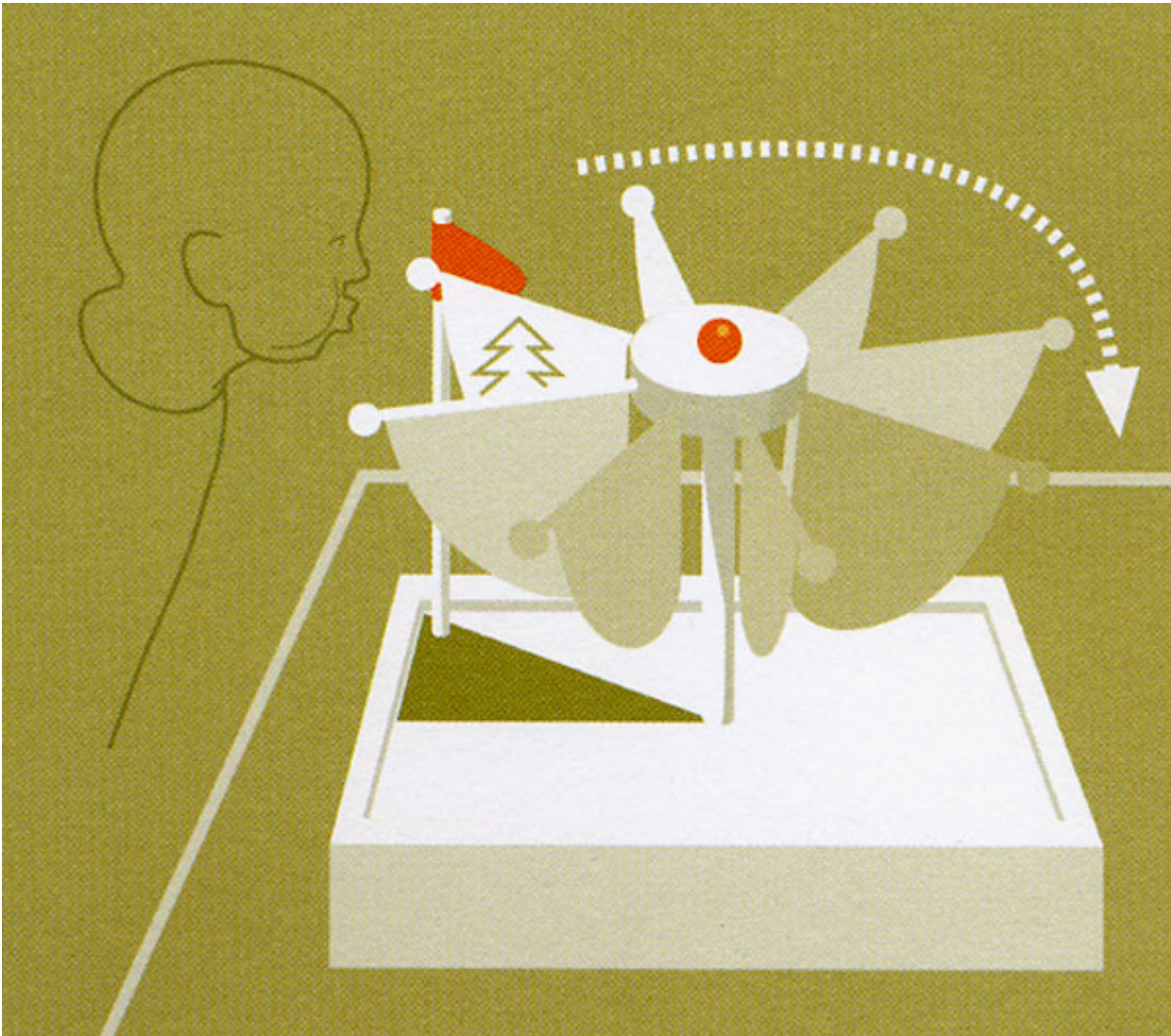
Q. *Bringing the toys to a possible market, is that a goal of the workshops?*

A. No, industrializing the toys is not the main objective. It is more important to work together as a social event, to pay attention to children with disabilities. It is sort of being an ambassador bringing awareness to different countries.

Q. *Are there any interest from the toy industry to sponsor such locations and events?*

A. It is not common but in China there was a sponsor. Here the toy producer used the UNESCO workshop to find out new, innovative products. They wanted to produce toys made out of bamboo, which was also the reason why the workshop had the necessity to use bamboo as a material. It was presented as a special advertising strategy to the Nuremberg Toy Fair 2004.

As a general it is interesting that the toy industry is currently facing an issue related to the lack of children, being that the larger generations has now past and the coming ones are much smaller. Therefore they are now starting to target toys also towards elderly people to expand their market. This is a much more difficult area because adults does not want to be associated with a toys as such therefore their needs need to be balanced to what interest them with something that carries the functional concept of a toy without looking like one.



Q. *How is it decided where the workshops are being held and how is the process? Is it the country that asks to have a workshop or is it UNESCO that proposes the idea to the country?*

A. Most often it is the previous participants that start the communication and organization in their own countries. They then take care of the national organization and approach the UNESCO Creative Workshops with a proposal. We already have a very long list of schools and organizations all over the world wanting to organize events in their home country. The problem is to find money and sponsors because the workshops are not included in the “official” programs of the UNESCO but as an additional activity depending on efforts of the people engaged.

Q. *Where will the next workshop be?*

A. It is not settled yet, but we would like to have one here in Italy again and next time it could be in Palermo.



Interview by [LineUlrikaChristiansen](#)

Links

[Toys for Children's Rehabilitation](#)

[Isabella Steffan](#)

[Myriel Milicevic](#)

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