

## **Challenge through toys / INTEGRATION WORKSHOPS**

Toy Design as a Process Encouraging Participation

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### **A new integrative concept for work in sheltered workshops**

#### **1) The Approach**

People with special needs are frequently not encouraged to do all they could; out of misplaced sympathy, they are treated with too much consideration and condescension.

It was our experience of working jointly with people with special needs as partners during international Creativity Workshops which gave us the idea of holding Integration Workshops in sheltered workshops. The aim of such Integration Workshops is to allow people with and without special needs to work together in considering which product designs could be produced in the sheltered workshops and which could be successfully sold afterwards. They then jointly select an initial number of designs and, in the next stage, work over those designs together. Finally, the results are tested and, if suitable, introduced into mass production. The basis for this step too relies on joint consultation in the production stages between co-workers with and without special needs in the sheltered workshops.

#### **2) The Background**

For many years, we have been working in the area of toy design for people with special needs. Since 1990, we have run or initiated Creativity Workshops called '*Toys for Children's Rehabilitation*' both within Germany and abroad. These Workshops brought together a mixed international and interdisciplinary group working in the areas of design, architecture, therapy and rehabilitation. For two weeks, the group lived in facilities for people with special needs and, during this period, developed new toys, often directly inspired by the immediate experience gathered there. This user-oriented approach has led to a large number of completely new and interesting ideas for toys.

Now we have taken our ideas a step further. Why shouldn't people with special needs create and shape their own environment themselves? Applying a new type of conceptual idea, still in the pilot phase, we have developed, together with a sheltered workshop and an interdisciplinary team of external partners, new forms of work practices which allow young people and adults with special needs (= employees of the sheltered workshop) to be directly and actively involved in the design process.

It has been made possible to put the new pilot project into practice within the framework of the EU project '*Production of Innovative Play Products in Sheltered Workshops*' (INNOVATION). We have placed it within the context of this international project under the name INTEGRATION WORKSHOP with the individual modules of *know-how*, *second step*, and *innova*.

### 3) The Pilot Project

We have taken the following steps during the preparation for the project:

- Development of the idea
- Finding suitable partners
- Forming an initiative group
- Planning the individual modules

One of those responsible for the original idea was Winfried Scholtz who, as an ergonomic therapist and former head of a sheltered workshop, is completely familiar with their situation and problems. He knew only too well, at first-hand, the dual-function of the sheltered workshop in Germany - so often seen as a basic contradiction between, on the one hand, the social brief of the sheltered workshop, namely the best possible development of those working in it and their preparation for the general job market, and yet, on the other hand, the workshop's existence being dependent on it running according to the market laws of profitability and efficiency. We believed, however, that this contradiction was often lacking foundation since staff development, training and qualification could and should lead, in the end, to a business working more efficiently.

This notion was further pursued in our organisation, in particular by Siegfried Zoels and Beate Punge. We developed the idea of a workshop which aimed at introducing new products into sheltered workshop production and simultaneously, through a process of joint participation, sought to impart new know-how, work skills and insights to all those involved in the project, whether with or without special needs.

It was not easy, though, to find an interested partner prepared to put our ideas into practice. For many of those involved in decision-making, the concept we had developed seemed either too unusual and too vague, or else was regarded as unsuitable and likely to disturb the existing day-to-day business.

In the end, we approached the 'Diakonischen Werkstätten für Behinderte', sheltered workshops in Potsdam-Babelsberg, run as a charitable organisation under the auspices of the Evangelical Church. Here, we found a partner well-used to taking new ideas on board. For the sheltered workshops themselves and the executive manager, the most interesting aspect of the project was the chance to establish a new product line of their own at low-cost.

In the course of our co-operation, they proved to be increasingly open to our new approach. The Initiative Group required several meetings before achieving an acceptable joint plan of the work lying ahead of us. In addition to those attending from the sheltered workshop, these meetings involved external consultants and a working group from the Technical University in Chemnitz as partners, the latter assessing and evaluating the development of the pilot project.

Our ideas were given the final concrete form necessary during the course of direct preparation with the sheltered workshop employees on the spot. Since this was a pilot project, the design readily allowed for the outcome of each separate step initially to be open and tolerated sensible deviations from the plan as first conceived.

The following modules have now been completed:

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|--|----------------------|---------------------|
| - Workshop I                                 | - <i>know-how</i>    | 30.11. – 03.12.1999 |
| - Workshop II                                | - <i>second step</i> | 10.04. – 14.04.2000 |
| - Production of small pilot series           |                      |                     |
| - Tests in different institutions            |                      |                     |
| - Workshop III                               | - <i>innova</i>      | 19.09. – 22.09.2000 |
| - Discussion about distribution perspectives |                      | 21.09.2000          |
| - Final round of discussions                 |                      | 08.11.2000          |

The primary aim of the four-day first module ***know-how*** was to become familiar with the conditions in the sheltered workshop, to get to know about the abilities and preferences of the employees and, furthermore, to assess the technical capacities available and the limitations they had. External participants (in this case, a designer, a therapist, a market expert, an assessment team and educational staff from the non-profit making organisation 'Fördern durch Spielmittel') participated in the work of the sheltered workshop for a two-day period and performed the same tasks as those working there.

A further aim of this module was to decide on which toy was especially suitable for the work processes in the sheltered workshop and consequently for production there. The toy was chosen from a range of newly developed toys, the results of previous Creativity Workshops.

The four-day *know-how* module resulted in both the unanimous choice of a suitable toy and detailed planning for the next workshop module.

The second module, ***second step***, offered the chance for co-operation under real conditions with a jointly-established goal – namely, the further development of a toy in terms of its numerous variations for play. In this way, toys were created that can then be introduced in the sheltered workshop and have real sales potential.

Amazing results were achieved within three working days: the simple toy *Stop and Go*, for example, was transformed into a basic slide-rule, a calendar or a set of scales. From the ideas developed, each group involved chose those which would be of most interest for the sheltered workshop. For the extensive work processes on these three days, each group included, in addition to the sheltered workshop employees and co-workers, a designer with experience in the therapeutic field, a member of the assessment team and an educational co-worker from the 'Fördern durch Spielmittel' organisation.

The quality of the results – in terms of the toys developed - encouraged us to take a market-oriented perspective and plan a **test phase** in order to optimise the toy ideas. During this phase, they were re-worked, produced in a small pilot series, and then, in June and July, tested in a number of different institutions, including the neighbouring Oberlinhaus School in Potsdam. This sort of toy testing has long been one of the main areas of expertise in our organisation and the tests were prepared, monitored and evaluated by our co-workers.

The test results were a direct input into the work accomplished in the third workshop module ***innova***, held in September 2000, which was centred around the integration of these results into the re-designing of the toys. In a parallel step, the sheltered workshop employees were divided into two separate groups and gradually introduced to the new work processes needed such as measuring, drilling or the application of various colours; this was combined with the use and testing of the aids, devices and machines especially developed for production of these toys. The tasks carried out over this period were different from standard everyday routine and, for many of those working in the sheltered workshop, were completely new. As in the previous

workshops, the sheltered workshop employees and co-workers were supported by a group of external experts.

By the end of this third module, the technical and personnel production requirements for the sheltered workshop had largely been defined. The new production process could be prepared directly after the workshop came to an end, giving the sheltered workshop employees a new perspective for the areas of their work; at that point, there were seven new toys which could be presented as the results of the workshop.

In a discussion with the head of the sales department at Wehrfritz, one of the largest toy distributors in Germany, the seven toys were positively evaluated and it was agreed that they were to be included in the company's 2001 Autumn Catalogue.

The remaining questions concerning production and sales formed the agenda for a **final round of discussions** held in November, 2000, where the subjects ranged from technical aspects to toy description from a therapeutic standpoint, product security and the presentation of the toys at the Nuremberg Toy Fair.

#### The evaluation of the project

An evaluation team from the adult education department at the Technical University in Chemnitz monitored the entire Integration Workshop cycle. The data collected was evaluated at the end of each workshop step and made available to the organisers. This information was able to help optimise the course of the project and formed the basis for re-directing single elements of it. Daily discussions with the evaluation team generated an atmosphere of continuous reflection on procedures and events, greatly benefiting the process as a whole.

#### **4) Seven new toys**

The toy used as a basis for the new designs was *Stop & Go*, a simple, elementary toy created by the Indian designer Sudarshan Khanna in the course of the 3rd UNESCO Creativity Workshop. It was chosen by the participants as it seemed ideal both as a starting point for developing further toy ideas and for later use in a therapeutic setting. Furthermore, the toy is easy to make and can be constructed from easily-available materials.

The toys developed as a result of the workshops are now being produced in the Diakonische Werkstätten für Behinderte Potsdam GmbH and distributed via Wehrfritz.

The toys are:

- Primary Colours
- Primary Numbers
- Traffic Lights
- Walking the Duck
- The Rolling Ball
- The Giant Rolling Ball
- The Rod Scales

The toys have all been deliberately designed to be related in appearance and size and form a clear series, linked together under the general name of **Stablemates**. They all come with detailed instructions for use and include information also directed at therapists. The toys will all be publicly presented for the first time at the Nuremberg Toy Fair in February, 2001.

## **5) The Experience**

Despite being convinced from the start that skilled work processes could indeed be designed jointly by those with and without special needs, all the initiators participating were nonetheless surprised by what had already been achieved in this project.

The employees of the sheltered workshop, to the greater part intellectually challenged, worked together with us and with the external partners. All participants were provided with all necessary materials as well as supplementary ones, and all worked with great commitment and perseverance and came up with numerous inventive ideas – many of them coming from the intellectually challenged participants themselves. Drawing on their own interests, personal and everyday experience, they often contributed surprising design solutions, clearly oriented towards the group of future users. Simultaneously, we experienced a process in which the employees of the sheltered workshop excelled themselves. They came to know themselves from a side they hadn't known before – as the inventors of toys they were partners and experts whose contribution was expressly wanted and valued.

## **6) Participants in the workshop modules**

From the sheltered workshop:

Ellinor Wilde, Horst Riechemeier, Martin Kreitschmann, Detlev Schröder, Bernd Schmädicke, Rüdiger Heise (Managing director)

External participants:

Alexandra Lückermann (therapist, designer)  
Achim Hügel (social worker, designer)  
Wolfgang Wörster (education specialist, therapist)

Marketing expert (Wehrfritz):

Liane Hirmer, Eugen Volkert

Evaluation Team:

Andrea Borst, Silvana Hackbarth, Rainer Hofmann

Initiative and organisation (Fördern durch Spielmittel e.V.):

Beate Punge, Anke Gottwald, Catherine Girke, Siegfried Zoels (Managing director)

Test organisation and implementation (Fördern durch Spielmittel e.V.):

Angelika Ebersbach