

FLASH ANIMATION IN CUBA



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LESSONS LEARNED FROM A COURSE ON WEB TECHNOLOGY WITHOUT THE TECHNOLOGY

In the spring of 2009, I taught a two-credit course in computer animation to a group of students in the Faculty of Audio-Visual Communications at the University of Havana, Cuba (*Facultad de comunicacion audio-visual del instituto superior de Bellas Artes*). This experience changed my perception of what it is to be a teacher by causing me to face my own limitations and by bringing out my strengths. To those who would like to have such an adventure, I offer some of the lessons I learned.

THE BEGINNING OF AN EXPERIENCE

The most important thing, above all else, is to start from a need expressed by the host organization. This statement may seem trivial but all too often, good North Americans that we are, we have a tendency to imagine that we know what there is to do ... In order to define this need, in the year preceding my departure I was fortunate to meet representatives from the host institution and this enabled us to specify the framework for the training. At this meeting, I came to realize that I was going to have to adapt to the Cuban context: because of the technological limitations of the Cuban computer equipment, we agreed not to give the course using the latest versions of Flash software. If I had prepared everything using state-of-the-art technology, I would have side-stepped the very first criterion for success for such an experience, namely to respond to a need.

Preparation does not stop there: it is also necessary to obtain an official invitation from the host department or institution of the other country and a visa. For Cuba, it is not possible to apply directly for a work visa: the host organization makes the request for you and advises you when it has arrived at the embassy. Equally, you must obtain authorization from the Academic Dean of your own CEGEP to participate in such a project. It is also necessary to establish a budget and to find the necessary funds. Add to all this, especially, the processes of obtaining a passport and purchasing an airplane ticket on top of preparing the course. All these tasks take time. That is why this type of project requires so much planning.

It is equally important to have realistic expectations and to carefully prepare your course content as well as your pedagogical strategies all of which prepares teachers to face a variety of situations in an environment which differs from the one to which they are accustomed. In terms of preparation, in the case of this course on animation using Flash software,

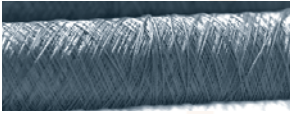
prior to departure, I had downloaded onto my laptop all the documentation needed to conduct the training session. In addition, when a course must be given in another language, it is very important to incorporate technical terms into your vocabulary, to try to memorize as many terms as possible even before leaving. This covers the part that you can control prior to departure ... The rest has to do more specifically with the problems of working in an environment that lacks your usual frame of reference; however this aspect cannot be planned before living it. Therefore it is better to recognize quickly that such an experience is not necessarily easy, but that with the necessary work and persistence, everything can work out in the end, all of which illustrates the story of the first days of my own experience.

STRESS OUT OR ADAPT?

As soon as I arrived in Havana, a meeting took place with the administration of the establishment in order to set the framework for the training session and to get to know each other well. It begins smoothly, but I know that I must start classes the very next morning. I already have several years of experience in the field and finding myself in front of a class is now natural for me. However, this particular time there is a little problem: I am supposed to give the course in Spanish. I suddenly feel like I did when I was just starting my career, a wave of stress comes over me and I even wonder why I got involved in this situation in the first place.

The first class was really difficult. Even though I speak Spanish fluently, it was in fact the first time I was giving a technical course in that language. I was going from the French version of the software to the Spanish version in order to understand the technical terms. In spite of my preparation, nervousness, the fear of making a mistake, the need to demonstrate my competency, etc., all prevented me from being myself. I felt that I had to be impeccable, especially considering my slight feeling of superiority upon seeing the obsolete condition of the institute's laboratory in Cuba. In the multimedia department at the *Cégep de Jonquière*, a **single** laboratory contains more computers and more power than **the only** laboratory in the entire Art Institute! I could have easily concluded that these students would not be able to complete my course, given the





physical conditions... In spite of everything, the course went well and, at the end, the students had progressed to the same level as their Quebec counterparts in a similar course that I had previously given in Quebec.

This should have satisfied me, but no! I felt that the students had not received what they had a right to expect. I use the verb *felt* to emphasize that all of this was an emotional matter and not a rational one, because, as I mentioned earlier, the students were progressing at the same pace as Quebec students, and this in spite of more difficult technological conditions. So I had no reason to blame myself.

A few technical difficulties which occurred during the first day also brought me face to face with my own limitations. Let me explain: in Quebec, with the Internet, information is just a few clicks away. Another context, another way of working; I had to learn to do things differently, even to accept that I might not be able to find the answer since I had no access to efficient research tools. After a single day of class there, I was wrestling with existential issues regarding the quality of my competence: when I am in Quebec, am I able to solve all the technical problems thanks to my skills or because the information is available on the Internet? Am I up to it, to convey my knowledge in a technological field? Those were the questions that kept coming back to me nonstop.

The next morning, I awoke feeling neither refreshed nor full of energy. I still had a lingering feeling of insecurity. I began this second day with a fear that I would not succeed, but little by little, my doubts dissipated. As time went on, I rediscovered the essence of teaching: that it is an act of generosity and sharing, of openness to others. Although sorely tested by the language barrier and the lack of equipment, my confidence in my disciplinary competence came back and the technological aspect became secondary. It was a return to the basics, to the very simple relationship between someone who is teaching and someone who is learning.

And to think that I usually explain to my Quebec students that we must adapt everything we do to the available technology, a lesson that I myself had not applied ...

LEVERAGE FOR THE FUTURE

Since many of the students were also teachers in the Faculty of Audio-Visual Communication at the Art Institute of the University of Havana, this course constituted the starting point for the switch to digital technology at this institution. They are now considering the possibility of collaborating with the *Cégep de Jonquière* to develop a plastic arts program that specializes in computerized art. However, the institute has limited financial resources and that is an obstacle to developing large-scale projects, unless they can find the necessary financial resources. However, now that the idea has been launched, this project will surely find its own way and I will have made a small contribution of which I am proud, to be sure.

I take away from this trip that teaching is not a technological experience, but a human adventure in all its magnitude and splendour.

Having already been to Cuba for a variety of projects with students, I already knew what to expect with regard to the conditions and context of work. At least, that is what I thought: once again, the intensity of the experience caught me by surprise. Finding myself teaching outside of my own culture has been truly enriching on a personal level. I come back to the essence of teaching: faced with students' strengths and weaknesses, faced with my own as well, it is about living the human experience of evolution, progress and understanding; it is about transmitting our knowledge as best we can, of guiding students so that they can achieve professional objectives based on criteria of knowledge and know-how as defined by our field of competence. Here lies the heart of the matter: to stay tuned to each person's humanity, to understand in order to help others to understand, to offer the gift of one's own knowledge, to repeat and redo, over and over again. I take away from this trip that teaching is not a technological experience, but a human adventure in all its magnitude and splendour. To teach is to see to it that everyone expresses the best they have to offer, in Quebec as well as in Cuba. ●

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