EXARC JOURNAL 2012/3
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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Conference Review: Didarchtik's Final Workshop at Butser

Persistent Identifier: https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10084

EXARC Journal Issue 2012/3 | **Publication Date:** 2012-09-15

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By mid-2012, the Learning Partnership Didarchtik had come to an end with a last workshop at Butser Ancient Farm in the UK. Many subjects we had touched on over the previous two years were back on the table – just as needed: this was the moment to look back on our experiences and see if we had learned something. Besides wrapping up our experiences, it was an extra-long workshop that including getting to know one of the oldest archaeological open-air museums in the UK.

> It was a good introduction to the subject of adult learning in archaeological open-air museums. Now we want to explore some of the subjects more in depth, so bring on the next project!

The Butser team made an effort to offer us a very diverse program, forcing us to think, evaluate Butser and ourselves. On arrival, we were stopped at the car park that leads to the entry of Butser. Over the summer of 2012, a new entrance building is being constructed and when we got there, the old building had already been removed, so the entrance area was modest. Each of us got a paper guidebook and we were sent into the site, to discover Butser at our own pace. For most of us this was the first visit to Butser and this is the way most adult visitors who visit, away from the main events, will discover the site. Other sources of information are the furnished houses and the information panels that go with them. Most of us thought we got a good overview of Butser this way, perhaps because we are used to these kinds of sites. However, when we got a guided tour by one of Butser's employees in the afternoon we realised we had missed a lot!

A good presentation was given by the South Downs National Park. Butser is located within this park, which covers an area of over 100 miles wide from east to west, not far from London. Although the South Downs attract many visitors and create valuable partnerships, there is still unexplored territory in the sense that certain adult visitor groups are missing; there was discussion about attracting returning visitors, et cetera. The Park has similar issues as some archaeological open-air museums, but it has a wider network and more possibilities that we can learn from. One thing was clear: the direct environment of a museum and the facilities around are very important, as many people do not come to this area just to visit Butser. They want coffee, a hotel and something else to do the next day.

Early on the second day, there was a presentation by John Evans, disability rights consultant and activist. He presented in a seemingly very simple way one of the most challenging issues for our type of museums: "diversity, disability and inclusion for all in all activities". It is vital we work in a diverse and inclusive way in order to ensure we have the participation of different kinds of people in the world we live in. There are many different kinds of disabilities; therefore there is not one approach, which fits all. People with disabilities do not want to be patronised or treated differently from anybody else, as having impairment does not make people less intelligent. What Mr Evans referred to can be simply summarised as good customer service. Disability or not, no two visitors are the same, so each needs a custom fit approach. There are wheelchair users who need certain practical adaptions in a museum; people who are blind or deaf require other adjustments and so do those who have autism, have a learning/intellectual disability or any other. All this doesn't have to cost a lot more. An old poster in the Netherlands printed on a mirror says: "have you ever met a normal person? Well, how was that"? We will have to approach each of our visitors as meaningful individuals.

In the afternoon, we attended four different activities, which were workshops for adults. The activities were themed with metal casting, wool spinning and dyeing, cooking a Roman dinner and making mini-frescoes (pendants). We were purposefully given a lot of hands on experience and information, less attention to the techniques of 'teaching adults' – this was something we should be able to extract after two years of Learning Partnership. Most participants completely got into these four activities, a welcome experience!

Following on that, we were challenged to build our own roundhouse! Three teams were made and the idea was to build a house with the materials offered, without explanation. This required each team to discuss, develop a plan and execute it – not all material was ready made! It was a follow up to the competition we had had in Bäckedal Sweden, on making a fire and, again, it was good to do a similar activity or touch upon a similar issue as before in this project and see if we had made any progress in understanding how to get such a job done.

That evening we spent in the Roman Villa at Butser, having a great dinner with original Roman recipes.

On the third day, we started with four presentations by people from Butser, each of them telling how they deal with adults and adult education. Not only visitors get educated in a museum, but the staff itself as well! The staff receives regular training, including health and safety but also on content (the story being told has many sides to it: from a basic story 'what is the Iron Age' up to how do you construct a round roof and why there are such funny pigs). Butser has about 200 volunteers. To them, being involved is easy: the structure is loose and they learn by talking with the employees and they learn by doing. Volunteers are not just unemployed or retired people, but also people at the start of their career are able to get relevant experience at Butser, benefitting both the museum and the other volunteers. Some of these young people are associated with school for special needs children, and spend some of their time at Butser where they can learn by doing things. This is good for their self-esteem and offers them another way of looking at life. The last category we heard about was Butser's Friends. Many of them started once as volunteers, in the 1980s and 1990s but they do not have the energy anymore to be actively involved in for example coppicing wood. Many of those have found that by being a financial donor they get a sense of belonging in return and the feeling of having done something good.

Looking back at the project as a whole

Looking back at the two years of Didarchtik, VAEE (NL) performed an evaluation that included feedback from almost all Didarchtik partners. VAEE has been instrumental in evaluating each step in the project, for which it deserves many thanks. EXARC would like to thank all organisations and individuals involved in making Didarchtik work. It has truly been part of lifelong learning for all of us.

At the beginning our ambitions and hopes were aimed high and we did not know what exactly to expect. We for sure did a lot of travelling and by the end of the two years we have a much better understanding of each other and of adult education in our field of work. The highlights were the five workshops we have had. Unfortunately, partly due to heavy workload when back home, there was little contact between the meetings. Coordination was kept simple and much of what we did was more 'bottom-up' than 'top-down'. While the meetings went great (content, social value), the work on the products was not as much teamwork as hoped for. Also, the products were not perceived as being as useful for the partners as the meetings were. Traveling all over Europe and meeting likeminded people was a great experience for all. All partners are more aware of the needs and wishes of adults and of the way they learn. Some of the theories presented in the workshops were very useful, but it takes another step, to make them applicable to our daily work. This step we have to take ourselves.

A project like Didarchtik brings people together with different ambitions and ideas on how to run a project. There always is a tension between doing what is promised in the application and doing what is good for the involved partners. Basically the project application should be relevant enough both for the EU and for the partners. Although we had a preparatory meeting in Oerlinghausen to collect ideas for the application, partners were less involved in the process of actually writing the Didarchtik application and EXARC was not sure how high to aim with the application in order to actually be accepted and low enough to still be feasible to execute.

Didarchtik partners also have ideas for future projects like on volunteers or finding some other 'common interest' among EXARC members like lake dwelling, or the relation with the schools. Another idea is a project on crafts, where each meeting is dedicated to one type of craft, like textiles, building and bronze casting. This way the craftspeople of museums all over Europe can meet and exchange ideas and practices.

There was a huge interest of EXARCs membership for the Grundtvig Learning Partnerships – and there are great future possibilities. EXARC itself has also learned a lot: keeping communication with all (prospective) partners clear at all times and offering a good structure from the beginning to the end of the project, this way providing security for all, and an instant overview of what is happening and what is still needed. This will also mean, EXARC will be more involved in both activities and products. We will also be active in writing the application together with the partners and wrapping up the project in the end. The next time we will know better what to expect and can design the project and the products better to suit our needs. In general, the Didarchtik partners have been very positive about these two years or as somebody put it: *"it was a good introduction to the subject of adult learning in archaeological open-air museums. Now we want to explore some of the subjects more in depth, so bring on the next project!"*

Keywords conference
archaeological open-air museum
review
education

Country United Kingdom

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