



LEARNING IS CHANGING

By Helena Gil da Costa

At the exact moment I began to write this article, I became aware that a little more than nine months have gone by since I was in Buffalo for the very first time to attend the Facilitating Creative Problem Solving (CPS) program. I find it rather curious that I have needed exactly this symbolic period of time to come to this situation, concerning the learning and practice of the Creative Problem Solving Process, which this article is about.

As anyone who has attended a Facilitating CPS Program organized by the Creative Problem Solving Group - Buffalo (CPS-B) knows, at the end of "day five," the facilitator team uses the following, among other things, to promote clarity:

- 1st - that each participant prepares a personal practice plan at short, medium or long term of every learning carried out;
- 2nd - that experience shows that 15 days at the most after the program, every learning carried out should be tested, otherwise we may lose it partially or completely.

When I was confronted with this situation, I was also confronting the consequences of a week full of new things, experiences, projects and dreams built from there. In addition, I was confronted with the "weight" of a program spoken in a language that was not my own and which I couldn't master completely. That situation made me wonder: "How could I begin to use CPS with all its specific language if, when I come back home, I'll have to do it in Portuguese?" To my questions "What are we doing in Portugal?" or "What can you give me in Portuguese?," the answers were "We don't know," or "Nothing." This meant that, before participating in the program, I had never had any contact in my country with a similar experience. We didn't expect there would be a change and, although I would have complete support from CPS-B, I'd have to start working on my own in Portugal and in Portuguese.

Therefore, after the "incubation period," I needed to organize the ideas and to find the necessary nerve and strength for the undertaking of an integration task. This task is far from its end and has been rather complex and detailed. I picked up all the information and materials and was able to make them comprehensible, suggestive and workable in my own culture and language.

Two months later, although I was still in the beginning of my learning, I facilitated my very first CPS session. This was due to the fact that this methodology allows an efficient result even if the process, tools and techniques are not yet completely mastered.

In a school in Oporto, with children from 2 to 7 years old, the teachers' team wanted organize a special and wide week's program to celebrate the beginning of Spring for their children, families, surrounding community and, of course, the teaching and non-teaching staff of the school.

The name for this program had already been chosen - Festa da Vida (Life Celebration). Despite the desire to create something new, all the ideas they had come up with to that point were very close to what has traditionally been done in Portuguese schools. Due to this fact, the School Master and the kindergarten teacher responsible for the project coordination, having known that there was "some process" or "something new" that might help their team with the program conception, asked for my cooperation.

I did the task appraisal rather easily, since I understand their work quite well, which allowed me to be sensitive and understand the interactions and synergies implied. Regarding the formation of the resource group, it was agreed that, besides consisting of the school team, it should also include a member from outside, as well as (and this was the difference) 3 children of 6 to 7 years old who would be assisted by the kindergarten teachers whenever reading or writing was needed.

Besides that, and for continuity reasons which had to do with former actions, the session would occur at the same schedule of other traditional school meetings and would last the same 90 minutes. So, to "stand the trial," I would have to prove to the group and to myself how much, as a group in a CPS session, we would be able to increase the team's productivity, motivation and efficiency. Along with all that, it would need to introduce higher quality, innovation and success components in that project (which besides being a challenge and done with a different shape would also mean extra work).

Rather excited, but also with great expectations (since we were all fulfilling and assuming new and very specific roles and responsibilities), the session took place the following week. During the 90 minutes, we worked very hard. As tools, we used Brainstorming with Post-Its™, VIR, Selecting Hits and Highlighting. Believe it or not, the presence of the 3 children was crucial. The adults' group who, was confronted with this methodology for the first time, experienced an initial period of some hesitation, even some insecurity, which needed to be unblocked. However, for the children, the CPS procedure was so natural to them

that, without doubt, we owe them the “newest and freshest” ideas which came out that day.

The session was not perfect. On my part I have to grow and improve the expertise of this process. However, and this information results from the group feedback at the end of the session, we did pass the test as we managed to go much further than in a traditional meeting. We would have needed several meetings to reach the same level considering the quantity of ideas produced (independent from the quality).

Since then I’ve been following the school activities. Preparation of Festa da Vida and during the day itself (March 21st), when I had the chance to be there and see a group of exhausted but happy teachers accompany more than a hundred kids, most of them with their parents or relatives, turning the school upside down. On the other hand, and perhaps even more interesting than checking the immediate results of this specific project, I’ve been able to perceive the consequences that the use of the CPS process has been having in the life of this community. These results include:

- More cohesion in the working team;
- More courage and imagination on creating new and different projects because they have realized that, after all, it is possible to do much more and go much further than what is settled by routine; and
- The use of the divergent and convergent thinking guidelines more and more spontaneously in different working situations although not included in the CPS process.

As I had the opportunity to say when I started this article, nine months have gone since I was in Buffalo for the first time and I know that the “child” who began to grow since then still has a lot to learn. The situation where I stand now regarding the application of CPS methodology and considering its flexibility is being able to develop through the accomplishment of the following projects or situations:

- practice of some of CPS tools during the classes of Education and Creativity in the training course for kindergarten teachers;
- voluntary formation of a group of students in the kindergarten teachers course so that, on a regular basis during 97 - 98, they can work with CPS in tasks within their interest and responsibility;
- application of the ALUo during the work with the students, namely in reflection and debriefing occasions about their teaching practice;
- making known the CPS process so that more schools and different organizations in Portugal can realize how much they can learn from CPS.

I met Scott Isaksen a little more than two years ago in Santiago de Compostela (Spain). Since that time, I have had the chance to know and work with other members of the CPS-B team, namely Brian Dorval, Ken Lauer and Brad Lewandowski. With all that, I have come to know a group of people who do more than a great work. They carry out a mission, which makes the difference because it is a real Mission.

Bibliographical References

(1) Isaksen, S. G., Dorval, K. B. (1996). *Facilitating Creative Problem Solving*. The Creative Problem Solving Group - Buffalo. Pg. 11 - 12.