



Andreas Heinecke

Dialogue in the Dark, Germany

Ashoka Fellow since 2005

Dialogue In The Dark by Andreas Heinecke

The German context

The interaction between “abled” and “disabled” people is very often hindered by stereotypes, fears, avoidance, and prejudice. Statistics talk about 610 million disabled people worldwide, of whom 400 million live in the developing world, and 38 million in Europe. But research shows that while they are all labeled “disabled”, only some 5% of them regard themselves as such. In Germany approximately 8 million disabled people are registered. One million are visually impaired and around 100,000 are legally blind.

Different levels of understanding, different levels of support, and different levels of access for the disabled are to be found in different countries. In Germany the physical needs of disabled people are generally well met by government welfare programs. We do have an anti-discrimination law meant to guarantee people with disabilities the same legal rights and responsibilities as those who are not disabled. But reality paints another picture. Indeed, only about 15% of the disabled have jobs, and the majority do not enjoy equal rights in terms of education, transportation, and access.

The situation of disabled people

The uneasiness many people feel around blind and hand-capped people leads to an “avoidance strategy” – something that leads to marginalization and discrimination.

Simulations of blindness already exist in Germany and other countries, but they are usually done for classes

teaching people how to approach the blind, how to help the blind. In part, these experiences are to show how difficult the life of a disabled person is. They tend to elicit compassion rather more than understanding and only very few people participate in this type of experience, which is most often part of educational programs in social work.

The new idea

The concept is simple: visitors are led by blind guides in groups through specially constructed dark rooms in which scents, sounds, wind, temperatures, and textures convey the characteristics of daily environments – for example, a park, a city, or a bar. The daily routine becomes a new experience. A reversal of roles is created: people who can see are taken out of their familiar environment. Blind people provide them with security and a sense of orientation by transmitting to them a world without pictures.

The concept has proved quite effective. Over the last years Dialogue in the Dark has been presented in 25 countries throughout Europe, Asia, and America. More than six million visitors have been led through our exhibitions by 6,000 blind staff members. And although it's been over 20 years, the demand is still growing. In 2006 alone 17 exhibitions were opened in 10 countries, giving 380 blind people all over the world the chance to have a job and to show 480,000 visitors that being blind is another interesting form of sense perception and a way of life.

One effect which is achieved by Dialogue in the Dark is especially important: the feeling of gratitude towards the blind companion. The blind person is seen as the person who helped to overcome anxiety and insecurity during the journey through the darkness. Gratitude and admiration evolves from that: social distance changes into interest, and pity into respect.

Thus it is clear that Dialogue in the Dark gives a fresh impetus, one that alters thinking patterns, makes stereotypes disappear, and creates a new accessibility to the unique world of blind people. One's own values and ideas are questioned, limitations are experienced, and through the encounter with people of another culture and life-reality a dialogue is developed that goes far beyond the visit to the exhibition.

A second matter proves impressively that this new awareness is not fleeting.

People who had visited the exhibition five years ago were contacted by telephone. These people were chosen randomly and asked to participate in a questionnaire that allowed particularly free and direct answers. The results are as follows:

- 100% remember the name of the exhibition,
- 100% remember the person they visited the exhibition with,
- 90% say that the exhibition is supposed to sensitize people to the world of blind people,
- 100% take the view that the exhibition achieved this aim,
- 98% had talked to friends, colleagues, and family members about their experience,
- 80% say that they now have more knowledge about blindness,
- 52% had encouraged someone to visit the exhibition,
- 34% come a second time.

Dialogue in the Dark has succeeded in establishing a place for social and emotional learning. The values of other people are taken up with interest, reflection and communication about being human begin, and empathy develops. This happens regardless of age, sex, level of education, and cultural and social background.

Furthermore, Dialogue in the Dark has a great influence on the development of the personalities and identi-

ties of the blind staff members. Being a guide changes self-perception, relations with the seeing population and increases self-esteem. Blind people gain strength in their acting and communicating competence, take responsibility, work together in a team, and learn to defend their interests. Their own income helps them to be independent and strengthens respect among family and friends. For many blind people their work for Dialogue in the Dark is their first paid job. They can gain experience and qualifications which can be useful on the labour market independently of Dialogue in the Dark. Blind people change from passive receivers of welfare to active contributors to society and are able to live a self-determined life.

The strategy

Even in the beginning there was hardly a doubt but that the concept of Dialogue in the Dark could be used effectively to create jobs for blind people and to change the general perception of blindness among the public and the media. But there were almost no financial resources or helpful networks available, so the question arose as to how to spread the message. In 1988, the year Dialogue in the Dark came into being, the franchise was not yet a widespread business model, so the idea of using only the label and know-how for building and operating arose more from need than knowledge or strategic points of view.

From today's point of view there could not have been a better way to disseminate Dialogue in the Dark worldwide. We use local structures, networks, and resources, and in addition we employ only blind people from the region where the exhibition takes place. We thereby reduce the strain on public budgets, generate local tax revenue, and increase purchasing power – moreover, we are able to establish the idea for the long term. The franchise-holders are connected via an international network and meet each other once a year to share experiences and form synergies. We cultivate an open exchange of knowledge, and reveal every bit of know-how which is necessary to make Dialogue in the Dark successful. We try to make our clients partners, and our partners friends in order to build up a long-term international cooperation based on trust and respect.

Lessons learned

I have been running Dialogue in the Dark for almost 20 years. What lessons have I learned?

- 1) Never give up
- 2) Don't count on logic
- 3) Life is change
- 4) Compensate the lack of talent with endurance
- 5) Be authentic
- 6) Trust people
- 7) Stay positive
- 8) Money never counts
- 9) Life has no handrail
- 10) Success is the most dangerous situation
- 11) Don't overestimate yourself
- 12) Stay humble
- 13) Things are becoming very simple

The most important lesson I have learned in the last years: not everything can be controlled. We have to find our place despite unknowable and unpredictable situations.

Origins

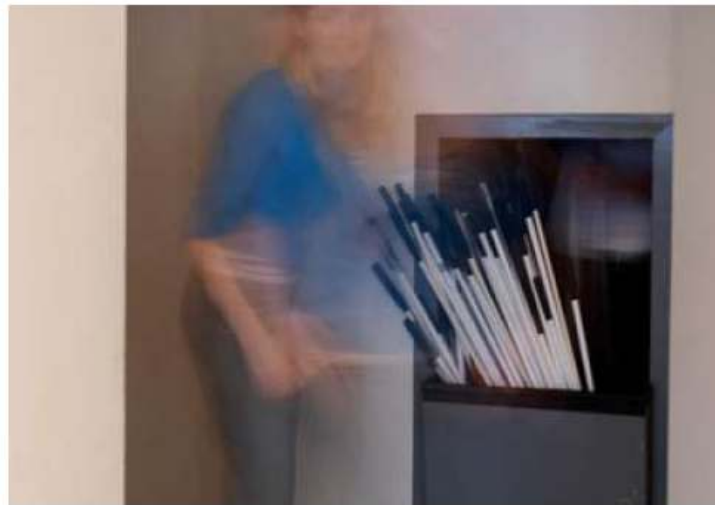
The concept of Dialogue in the Dark has gained acceptance and currency worldwide. People often forget how difficult it was to build a business model in order to pursue a social mission, and to make a living from that in the long term. Today I know it is possible to make a living from it. You devote yourself to a project. And whether because of naivety, missionary zeal, social romanticism, rebellion, a sensitivity to injustice, a lack of understanding, or a fighting spirit, you blaze a trail that will definitely not end up in early retirement and an idyllic life in terraced houses or clubhouses. Of course, the question does arise as to what drives you.

The answer to all this is obvious and short: there is no other way. Dialogue in the Dark is connected so closely to me and my history that it has become an inextricable

part of myself. The beginnings of this life task go back to the history of my family. My mother had Jewish relatives who were persecuted and murdered during the Nazi era. By contrast my father passed through the whole National Socialist educational system and grew up surrounded by both tacit supporters and perpetrators. After the war my parents found each other and started a family. Since the age of 13 I have been aware of this family constellation and I have wondered again and again what causes people to become mass murderers and what compels people to abandon humanity, morality, and self-respect. Since the age of 13 I have tried to understand something which is not graspable by mere intelligence. Not even my years of studying history, literature, and philosophy helped me answer the question of how and why violence, contempt for human beings, and systematic murder arise.

After finishing my studies I started working at a broadcasting company as a documentalist and journalist. One day our supervisor asked me if I would be interested in training a journalist who had become blind after a car accident. My basic attitude was rather that of avoiding contact with handicapped people, and the idea of being blind scared me. I met this blind young man and was deeply touched by his positive personality, his potentials, his positive outlook on life, his humor, and his intelligence. I regarded my attitude, consisting of a mixture of pity, empathy, anxiety, and insecurity, as something shameful. Even my years of searching for an understanding and acceptance of being different could not keep me from judging people's lives as "worthy" or "unworthy". I trained the young man at the broadcasting company and received a life-time lesson. Though to some it may sound grandiose, a blind person had to come into my life to open my eyes.

Because of my studies I knew that the Nazis considered handicapped people as "useless". Today handicapped people are still disabled in terms of social exclusion and personal self-realization, and are shunned to the fringes of our societies. Thinking of the importance my personal encounter with a blind person had had in my life, I was motivated to create a place where blind and seeing people could come together. It was obvious that we had to do it in an unusual style and makes complete use of the potentials of blind people. Martin Buber's maxim



that “the only way to learn is through encounters” is the philosophical basis for the concept of Dialogue in the Dark— one many people will be able to experience in the future.

◀ ▲ Photos:
Dialogue
in the Dark

Andreas Heinecke is the first Ashoka Fellow in Western Europe. He is the founder and CEO of Dialogue in the Dark, an international social franchise company to foster employment for disabled people and to change perspectives towards otherness. Andreas is a fellow of the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship and has won various awards.

Dialogue in the Dark

Mail: Alter Wandrahm 4, D-20457 Hamburg, Germany

Phone: +49 40 309 634 50

Fax: +49 40 309 634 61

E-mail: Info@dialogue-in-the-dark.com

Web: www.dialog-im-dunkeln.de, www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com