

Dear friends

When younger people than yourself send a request to say a few words on the history of the network, one should beware. Mostly it means you are part of the furniture in an organization and as long as it is still vintage value, it's ok. Antique is a different matter. So I have comforted myself with the idea I am here because of my vintage value.

Yes, I was there and then in 1989, only 30 years old, in the magical year when not only the Berlin wall fell, but we also first met with a bunch of teachers from 7 countries in the Dutch town Geldrop: if I'm not mistaking Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and the hosting Netherlands. It was my first encounter of the third kind: three languages permanently being used not to offend anyone; English, French and German. It made the meetings quite heavy, because everything was translated all the time in the three working languages. I remember coming home as a young teacher, with a lorryload of impressions and lots of plans to give a new drive to my foreign language teaching practice and to set up exchange projects with European partners.

Thanks to the initiative of the Strabrechtcollege and its teachers under the leadership of the always enthusiastic Ludo Mateusen, we gathered regularly to prepare a huge conference for 1991 and soon after the first meeting more countries joined: Denmark, Portugal, Greece. The conference of 1991 in Geldrop was not only unprecedented, it would never be repeated in its dimension: 400 pupils, hundreds of host families, thousands of meals, workshops, a religious service in the church of Geldrop and a big plenary youth parliament session in Eindhoven with members of the European Parliament debating with the youngsters.

After the conference no one wanted this exceptional experience to be ended there and then and the Europroject Education without Frontiers was born. In 1992 the schools met in Belgium and worked out a sustainable network concept to be able to continue the cooperation. This resulted in a first charter, formally signed by all the headmasters in 1993 in the former French partner school at St-Cyr-l'Ecole near Versailles. The schools confirmed a number of principles and committed themselves to come together annually and organize conferences for both teachers and pupils. In 2005 this charter was updated and renewed in Dendermonde-Belgium, because under way lots of new countries were *ludoed* into the network, as we used to circumscribe Ludo Mateusen's convincing way to load a lot of work onto one's shoulders. And today, in 2018, we are here again to renew our commitment, for the third time, and as it happens once again in Belgium, in Namur, in Olaf's Country.

Our network has thoroughly changed since the early days, which is not astonishing as the past three decades underwent a technological whirlwind. In 1989 our sole way of communication was letters on paper: no internet, no email, no cell phones. Soon the fax was introduced in the network, a big step ahead, and by the late 90's the internet had broken through with email as the new communication tool. Apart from that we made our network more professional and thanks to the European programs we succeeded in bringing in a lot of money. Many of you will remember our projects for the European funds: Basic Values, Iriss, Ethos, Estia and Eon. Likewise within the Comenius framework we organized smaller bilateral or multilateral projects, we had master classes, we stimulated individual pupils mobilities into our schools, we exchanged a lot between schools and we had our network conferences all over Europe, always

linked to a theme: Oceans, Sustainability, Taiga, Ecorocks, European identities, Ide@s, Democracy, Tanssi, etc. Some ten thousand students and hundreds of teachers took part in these meetings and projects.

We also worked on the corporate governance of the network: during the first ten years secretary-general Ton Van Berkel co-ordinated the management, and what had started as the Esch-group in 2003 ended up with the election of a steering committee in 2009 in Cardiff. The rest of the story is commonly known.

Although we have come a long way, it seems necessary to repeat our charter principles on a regular basis. The Europe of today is not the Europe of 1990 when communism collapsed and nations were queuing up to become a European member state. As the Israeli historian Harari puts it in his *21 lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> century* history has not come to an end and following the Franz Ferdinand moment in 1914, the Hitler moment in the nineteen thirties, the Che Guevara moment in the sixties, we now find ourselves in the Trump moment. This time the liberal mainstream ideology is not faced by a coherent ideological opponent like imperialism, fascism or communism in those eras. The Trump moment is far more nihilistic with the main message that in order to preserve liberty and prosperity, be it in Europe or in the US, it is best to build a wall on the border. Consequently it is a big challenge to stand up against movements that preach a return to isolation and adopt illiberal policies against non-natives.

The first network conference in 1991 in Geldrop focused on fighting stereotypes, prejudices, intolerance, racism and xenophobia. These words were also taken up in the charters of 1993 and 2005. In the charter we are signing today we scaled it down to “the promotion of tolerance”. Perhaps it is a sign of the times

we are living in, in which borders and walls have become mainstream ideas. Our ancestors have fought for a free and prosperous Europe. As the only remaining founding father of this wonderful educational network this is my personal message I want to convey today on this public stand: keep on believing in the force of a united Europe and beware of tribesmen who claim they are able to make your individual nation great again. We have ended that delusion in 1918 in Flanders Fields.

Thank you for your attention.