

# THE SOCIAL CIRCUS INSTRUCTOR'S ROLES

*By Michel Lafortune*

Social circus instructors are asked to teach circus techniques as part of an educational program, but they are also called upon to help youth in their overall development by acting as important role models for that growth process. Teaching the circus arts is basically a pretext for building a trusting relationship with at-risk youth and giving them the resources they need to grow.

In order to understand at-risk youth and the complexities of their milieus, instructors must have strong social awareness, developed educational skills and a spirit of openness. Instructors must also have realistic expectations about what participants can learn and put the focus on effort instead of results.

The duties and responsibilities of the instructor are determined by the work mandate. This mandate is defined by how far advanced the intervention program is, as well as the circumstances and development of the youth participating in the circus workshops.

## DEFINING THE INSTRUCTOR'S MANDATE

The mandate issued by the hiring organization outlines the responsibilities and determines the social circus instructor's field of activity. It must be clearly understood by the instructor and employer, as well as by the local community and other workers in the field (organization coordinator, assistant instructor, community worker, etc.). The clearer the mandate and the more realistic the expectations, the easier it will be to achieve the objectives.

The instructor's mandate will vary according to certain factors:

- Instructor status (coordinator, assistant, intern, etc.)
- Individual experience and qualifications
- How far advanced the program is at the time
- The length of the work mandate
- The needs and expectations expressed by the community and the program's partner organizations

## THE INSTRUCTOR'S OBJECTIVES

As part of the work, the social circus instructor must be able to do the following:

- Adapt to the socio-economic and cultural realities, as well as the overall skills of participants.
- Take into consideration the cultural codes, lifestyles and unique customs of the community in which the intervention is taking place.
- Quickly find available resources to ease the process of producing these workshops.
- Respect the rules and vision of the partner organization.
- Encourage other individuals in the community (family, friends, members of the partner organization) to participate and support the youth's involvement.



## THE INSTRUCTOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES

The responsibilities of the social circus instructor will vary depending on the mandate given and must be carried out with the partner community. Responsibilities include the following:

- Organizing and planning circus workshops
- Facilitating circus workshops appropriate to the needs and proficiency of the participants: introducing the circus arts, refining techniques, introducing artistic elements (acting, characters, etc.), preparing a public performance
- Setting up and maintaining a physically and emotionally safe environment for the workshops
- Handling materials and logistics
- Evaluating all activities, from preparing to running the workshops and briefing the relief team

## THE INSTRUCTOR'S ROLES

For workshop participants, the social circus instructor must do the following:

- Prepare and teach circus activities appropriate to the skills and experience of participants, as part of an educational initiative that takes their overall development into consideration.
- Listen to participants, paying special attention to their needs, stages of development and limits.
- Empower participants through learning, and provide them with a wide range of tools to keep them stimulated and actively involved in the learning process.

For community workers, the instructor must do the following:

- Develop a relation of trust and encourage teamwork in a complementary and harmonized way, in accordance with the tandem facilitation model.

For directors of the partner organization, the instructor must:

- Gear the program's general intervention toward the local community eventually taking charge.

Lastly, the instructor may also play a role in the community. As such, the instructor must do the following:

- Contribute to changing the community's perception of at-risk youth by encouraging involvement in circus activities or public performances.

## THE INSTRUCTOR'S POSITION AND MOTIVES

Social circus instructors must oftentimes find a compromise between the mandate they've been given and their own personal ambitions. This allows the instructor to remain balanced and composed when managing tasks and dealing with the expectations of project collaborators.

The instructor's motivations can be defined using the four main values for volunteers, as generally outlined by NGOs (non-governmental organizations) for international cooperation:

- Professional challenges
- Social engagement
- Cultural challenges
- Personal experience

## DEFINING THE INSTRUCTOR'S LIMITS

It is difficult to define the instructor's limits, but in a general sense, social circus instructors teach circus techniques, get involved with at-risk youth and support community workers and local partner organizations. The mandate will determine what's required and must clearly define the instructor's responsibilities and scope of action, as well as the position to be assumed by the instructor, employer and community partners.



## THE ATTITUDES TO ADOPT

The arrival of a social circus instructor in a community can disrupt its usual activities and work methods. However, the introduction of new methods, interventions and tools for change can be well received if they are presented with respect and flexibility, gradually introduced so as to build consensus and framed in a spirit of mutual help and support.

It is therefore important to adopt and maintain an attitude that is open, attentive, flexible, respectful, humble and cooperative. Also, instructors must remember to be adaptable to the realities of the community and the context in which they are working. The attitude adopted will always transcend action. After the instructor has left, the circus skills taught will remain in the community, of course, but the attitude displayed by the instructor when sharing these skills will have a far more lasting effect.

