

## *Bicycle education in a non-cycling town : the initiatives of Pro Velo in Brussels*

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Brussels is not a very cycle-friendly city. That is anyway the impression foreigners get about it and the reason why very few people living in Brussels cycle. Pro Velo estimates the proportion of cyclists around 1.5 %, while the aim of the Brussels-Capital Region in its *Mobility Plan Iris* is 10 % by the year 2005. The authorities undertook, with this intention, the realization of 19 regional cycle routes (225 km) : up to now, one has been inaugurated (14 km) and another 75 km of cycle paths are to be used on certain main roads.

On the other side, Pro Velo tries to get people on the bicycle, since 1995 with the organization of bicycle events, since 1997 with a large bicycle education programme towards schools and general public.

From the beginning, we have adopted an integrated approach including several activities, each for a determined public.

We have noted that children between 8 and 14 are the most open to bicycle education. If children have not been sensibilized to using the bicycle, once adolescent they will use a motorcycle or a car. But you do not make bicycle education with a child aged 8 or 14 in the same way. Common sense and experiments enabled us to refine our animations in schools.

You will not get children on their bicycles if you fail to convince teachers and parents. The only way to convince adults is... to get them on their bicycles as well. That is why we set up, in June 1997, a permanent cycling school in Brussels and a bicycle education programme for future schoolmasters.

It is from our activities in primary and secondary schools that we have the biggest expectations in terms of getting people on their bicycles. They have recently led to the first bike-pooling experiment in Brussels. We will study that point more carefully, but we will also analyze shortly the impact of the other elements of our bicycle education programme.

### **1. Activities in primary and secondary schools**

Since January 1998, we have implemented a wide bicycle education programme in the primary and secondary schools of the Brussels-Capital Region. The duration of those activities varies from 1 \_ hour (mastery test) to half a day (cycling in the traffic), but we also organize bicycle-days. Every activity is prepared with the schoolmaster, so that we respond to his expectations as good as possible and always learn something new.

#### **1.1. For pupils from 10 to 14, cycling in the traffic**

As many others, we think that the best way to teach pupils how to cycle safely is *to bring them on their bicycles into the traffic*.

We do this in four steps :

- exercises in the playground (10-15 minutes)
- cycling around the school (15 minutes)
- cycling in town (2 hours)
- analysis of the cycling experiment (30 minutes)

The first two steps are used to make sure that the pupils can turn left, which requires a good coordination on the bicycle. Firstly in the playground, then in the traffic around the school.

The Pro Velo instructor takes the head of the group, a teacher the end and others cycle in the group, with regular intervals. The ideal proportion is one adult for 5 to 7 pupils (the Pro Velo instructor not included), that is to say two guides at least for a group of 15 and three for a group of 20.

We planned the route and know in advance where we will stop, and why. With each stop (ten approximately), we question the pupils on the difficulty and the way of approaching it. The instructor first shows the maneuver on his own then the pupils make the exercise by two, accompanied by an adult. A good monitor can also benefit from a given traffic problem to analyze it on the spot with the pupils... or later, during the evaluation, according to what he considers convenient.

The evaluation is the occasion for the pupils to speak about the experiment. Some tell about their fears, others about what they thought they could do, and we see together if cycling in the traffic has consolidated or dissipated the prejudices. We do not hide anything to them. No, the motorists sometimes do not respect the cyclists. Yes, cycle installations are still rare in Brussels. Yes, one is stronger and more secure with a group than alone. And so on. The experiment has generally convinced them that, with an intelligent and responsible behavior on the road, they can improve their own security appreciably.

The formula is appropriate to pupils of primary schools (10-12 years).

Pupils of secondary schools (13-14 years) enjoy having a greater autonomy on the road. This is why we rather propose them an interactive cycle tour. We give such an instruction: « you must cycle from school to the city hall (the swimming pool, the sportshall, the forest...) by a route that is secure and neither too long, nor too steep ». Divided into groups, the pupils work out a route on the map and give it to the instructor before the D-day. That day, each group is accompanied by an adult. The pupils take turns at the head of group and the adult places himself in second position, ready to intervene in case of imprudent behavior of a pupil or a driver.

In any case, with pupils of secondary schools, we try to show that the pleasure of cycling combines wonderfully with discovering Brussels' natural and architectural heritage.

## 1.2. For children of less than 10 years, the skill testing track

A child of less than ten years seldom cycles good enough to concentrate on the urban traffic and its traps. Therefore we prefer to work inside (i.e. on the school playground) with young pupils. Easy to use materials, some good exercises, and we test their skill with a track : a timed test, including penalties and resulting in a cyclist's diploma. A good preparation for a trip into the traffic.

## Evaluation

Our activities in the primary and secondary schools of Brussels began in January 1998. In 1998, we carried out 31 animations, for 730 pupils. In 1999, 66 animations, for 1450 pupils. In 2000, probably about 100-120 animations and 2500-2800 pupils.

If one refers to the number of animations, the progression is thus clear. It is less clear if one analyzes the schools which order these animations: 23 schools in 1998, 16 schools in 1999, about thirty schools this year. Some schools intensify their programme of bicycle education, other schools join them, but a lot remains to be done to convince the teachers to go out cycling with their pupils.

### *Which impact on the cycling habits among young people ?*

Firstly, our animations allow us to get in contact with children who cannot cycle and to get them on their bicycles thanks to our cycling school (on Saturday morning) (see further) or private courses (on Wednesday afternoon).

Secondly, the pupils who go cycling into the traffic often make it a first experiment. And that experiment is positive: cycling in town is « less difficult and less dangerous » than it seems, though « less dangerous in group than on your own ». Those who already have a (very) good control of the bicycle sometimes say that they « would cycle to school if daddy and mummy agreed ».

Here we are : one of the barriers to cycling for the young people is the fears of their parents. Therefore it is also advisable to promote cycling among teachers and parents, and convince them - and how, if not by the practice? - that with an adequate preparation of the pupils, a sufficient accompaniment, clear instructions and exercises in real situation, one can train young cyclists to look after their own security, even in Brussels.

The first bike-pooling experiment in Brussels comes from teachers and parents we trained for accompanying groups of pupils, when going out with classes or the organizing our bicycle event Dring Dring.

## **2. Our great bicycle event in Brussels : Dring Dring**

Our actions with schools never lose sight of our great bicycle event in Brussels : Dring Dring. Since 1995, it takes place every year in May. The day dedicated to schools is the Wednesday morning. This year, on Wednesday 10 May, about 3500 pupils took part in one of the ten routes, all proposed through the Brussels-Capital Region. Groups of 400 or 600 pupils can only cycle through the Region if escorted by police officers (with motorbikes or in cars) and lots of teachers and volunteers.

One will understand that Dring Dring is initially an action intended to make the bicycle more visible in Brussels, in particular in the schools. The event makes our animations in schools possible. It is these animations, carried out with smaller groups, that train the pupils with their security on the road.

### **3. Bike-pooling with schools in Brussels**

In certain schools of Brussels, our animations and the action Dring Dring, with the passing of years, caused a renewed interest for the bicycle. The school Saint-Dominique (Schaerbeek) started a bike-pooling experiment on 27 April 2000. It is the first time in the Brussels-Capital Region and a beautiful example of collaboration between various partners : teachers, parents, police officers, daily cyclists, all trained and coordinated by Pro Velo : up to now, 25 adults and 50 children participate.

#### **Why this success ?**

Initially, because the ground is favourable : the school (teachers and parents), the local authorities and police support cycling.

Then, because the conditions put by the parents have been met. Today, after a long preparation, we can offer a « five stars » service, that is :

1. at least two adults accompanying the pupils five days a week, back and forth, on every route
2. five routes converging towards the school and taking the pupils home
3. a formation, both theoretical and practical (several recognitions of the routes)
4. police officers responsible for the security at dangerous crossroads
5. cycle infrastructure carried out especially for the operation.

Some routes can already be used by other schools of the district and other districts are interested. The experiment will be extended to others (not only in Brussels) in September.

### **4. Training of the future teachers**

Our know-how, we want to teach it to others. Teaching road safety forms part of the programmes for the primary schools, but lots of future teachers do not know how to do it. This is why we set up a two days formation intended to give them the knowledge, both theoretical and practical, necessary to bring a group of pupils on their bicycles into the traffic. Every year, it relates to a good hundred students.

### **5. Cycling school in Brussels**

Since June 1997, Pro Velo proposes in Brussels a service of cycling school in two modules : the first for those who cannot cycle (beginners), the second intended for those who want to improve their control of the bicycle and be able to cycle in the traffic. This service is open to everybody, from March to October. The courses are given on Saturdays morning (4 x 2h30). A new formation starts every month for module 1, and since 1999, only every two months for module 2.

So, any interested person can, within two months, acquire not only balance and control of the bicycle, but also the ability necessary to cycle in the traffic. A third module, given by the instructors of the Gracq (association of daily cyclists), teaches them how to overcome the traps of the traffic.

*Which is the success of this initiative and its impact in terms of change in the practices of displacement ?*

We questioned our pupils of 1998 and 1999 (see appendix) about their experiment. From that, it arises mainly that:

- the cycling school responds to a real demand, mainly from women
- the rhythm of learning and availability being different, private courses (on Wednesday afternoon) are given to children
- the passage of one module to the next is not obvious : many pupils are satisfied with the first module; they achieve *their* goal, to be able to cycle, but away from traffic (in forests) or at the seaside.

The cycling school does not manage to convert its pupils into daily cyclists. Why?

One can learn, in ten hours, the balance and the control of the bicycle; one needs more time to get rid of his apprehensions of the traffic in a city where cycle infrastructures still seem too rare. The instructor teaches how to cross the roundabouts, to cycle on the paving stones or the tram rails and so on. The exercises are not sufficient.

On the other hand, most of the people living in Brussels do still consider bicycle as a toy.

To get people on their bicycle, we propose -also to past pupils of our cycling school- an action called « one month on the bicycle » : free loan of a bicycle and other services for those who want to become daily cyclists. This action will take place for the first time from July till October 2000 (4 x 25 people) and could be intensified next year if the evaluation were favourable.

### **Appendix : results of the survey on cycling school 1998 and 1999**

Before = before the courses.

After = after the courses.

**1998** : 65 participants ; 31 answers.

	before	after	today
I own a bicycle	16 %	71 %	74 %
I am able to ride a bicycle	19 %	100 %	100 %
I am able to cycle on a straight 50 cms wide line	10 %	77 %	87 %
I am able to make a 90° turn	6 %	65 %	77 %
I am able to cycle holding the steer with one hand	0 %	29 %	35 %
I am able to turn holding the steer with one hand	0 %	13 %	16 %
I am able to cycle outside traffic	10 %	84 %	74 %
I cycle on the street when traffic is low	0 %	58 %	55 %
I cycle even when traffic is dense	0 %	6 %	10 %
I cycle daily	0 %	0 %	6 %

**1999** : 36 participants ; 23 answers.

	before	after	today
I own a bicycle	34 %	65 %	74 %
I am able to ride a bicycle	17 %	100 %	100 %
I am able to cycle on a straight 50 cms wide line	17 %	100 %	100 %
I am able to make a 90° turn	13 %	82 %	87 %
I am able to cycle holding the steer with one hand	13 %	43 %	43 %
I am able to turn holding the steer with one hand	0 %	21 %	21 %
I am able to cycle outside traffic	13 %	65 %	69 %
I cycle on the street when traffic is low	0 %	30 %	39 %
I cycle even when traffic is dense	0 %	4 %	4 %
I cycle daily	0 %	0 %	0 %