

LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER AT THE BG BLUDENZ

1) Innovation

We live in complicated and demanding times. Bravery and creativity are among the key competencies required to solve the numerous problems surrounding us. The current refugee crisis is one such problem. Many people saw it coming, but nobody could have anticipated the magnitude of the ramifications with which it would shake our society to its core. So far, most efforts to deal with it have proven woefully inadequate.

While the basis of our project is the traditional idea of „a little less conversation, a little more action please“, we believe that our dialogue-based approach may be able to radically alter perceptions of the refugee crisis by actively fostering integration and actively enabling social participation on the level of secondary education:

Our premise is peer-based. It seeks to help unaccompanied refugee minors to find their place and independence in a new society through peer-instructed language sessions. More than a language course, our weekly meetings are a forum for intercultural dialogue. Our focus is not only on language acquisition, but also about mutual experiences (summer festivals, snowball fights, Christmas carols and gift giving, theatre workshops, trips to museums, autobiographical writing...). All of this gives the refugees, but also our students, the chance to grow.

Our success so far has depended on a 1:1 staff-student ratio and our students' self-organizing and interpersonal capabilities. Self-empowerment and mutual respect are key and make the refugees feel welcome and esteemed.

In addition, we have strong ties with local and regional partners (charitable organisations, museums, theatres...). These co-operations help us to point out that something can be achieved when people work together – that way, we are all better off in the long run.

The basis, however, is that students have been heavily involved in every step of the decision-making process from the get-go. They have always been aware that their ideas are being heard and used.

After about 14 months of working on and developing the project we have realized that other schools and numerous public and private institutions are extremely interested in what we are doing. However, it appears to be difficult to emulate our ideas into other schools' frameworks. The reason for this is simple: the initial spark – as it happened in our case – needs to be

triggered by the students (“bottom up”), not by the teachers (“top down”), so as to avoid the typical school situation of the educators telling the students what to do.

This may be, above everything else, the thing that sets us apart the most from other refugee-related projects: our students enjoy equal rights, which guarantees a high level of excitement and participation.

Even though young, unaccompanied refugees appear to be omnipresent in the media these days, they are still an unknown quantity when it comes to problem-solving approaches. So far, nobody seems to really know what to actually do about them. Our know-how as educators and dedicated students enables us to bridge this gulf, at least partially. Of course, many asylum seekers have had to endure horrible things, but they are also ordinary teenagers. Sometimes they refuse to participate, balk at suggestions or rebel. Our students know those feelings all too well, which is exactly why they can communicate at eye level.

Another important, but wholly under-represented, target group of our project is our students. They learn to take responsibility and to participate actively. By doing so, they develop a keen eye for what is going on within our society. Their contribution makes an impact, they are being heard, they cannot be ignored.

We believe that what we are doing is important as humans among humans, contributes to dismantling racist prejudices and supports intercultural respect.

2) Participation

Both target groups, refugees and students alike, have the chance to sustainably gain from the project. The refugees increase their chances for successful integration, for asylum, for finding rewarding jobs. Students dismantle cultural prejudices, increase their self-confidence and hone their language skills. What is more, they are working actively towards integration and solving one of society’s biggest challenges today.

We are tapping into our target groups’ potentials and allowing them to grow by giving them the chance to become equal partners and by enabling them to choose their own speeds and methods. The small groups are tailor-made to meet the individual participants’ individual needs when it comes to language and culture acquisition. This has allowed our students to massively improve their social skills. It is especially fascinating to observe from a semi-distance how the students, who were initially quite reserved, if not shy, blossom into

self-confident teachers themselves. No problem is too big for them anymore, no challenge too daunting.

As mentioned previously, our two target groups are students and refugees. The students are not just the recipients of our orders anymore, but are – quite literally – running the show these days, from preparing teaching material to organizing movie screenings, theatre workshops, lectures, sporting activities or parties.

The refugee group is heavily involved as well. Time and time again they are being asked to help as translators or coaches. In addition, their active participation in the workshops is a *sine qua non*.

One aspect that is especially important for us is a contribution to the society-wide appreciation of both of our target groups. Since we “force“ refugees and students to join the “public sphere“ (interest groups, politicians, the public, media...) and to share their stories, they are turning into ambassadors for successful integration and participation. This kind of contact is especially important when it comes to the so-called “concerned citizens”. Not everyone shares our (realistic) idealism and not everyone has to, far from it. But by engaging in serious discussions with those who have reservations or who are outright hostile towards our efforts, opinions and attitudes on both sides can be questioned and reflected upon.

3./4. Implementation and Public Image

Many aspects of this question have already been answered. The following are just some final thoughts on some issues.

Upon its inception, it was a gamble to hand over the responsibility for the project’s success to the students, but a gamble that has well and truly paid off. This constellation alone guarantees an explosion of creativity. What is more, the risk of drowning in routine is diminished as well.

The students’ courage is admirable. It would be so much easier to spend the afternoon at home or with friends, complaining about politics or a society going down the drain, especially since that would be much more in line with the public opinion these days. But this is not what our students have in mind. It takes guts to expose yourself to the danger of ridicule, harassment and even violence, while holding on the belief that integration can only succeed when large numbers of people work towards that very goal.

Due to our flat hierarchy, we have always been able to react spontaneously and non-bureaucratically to parameter changes. This has been a relevant factor ever since the idea of our weekly gatherings was first discussed in September 2015. What is more, the rather high fluctuation in the composition of our core group (some refugees have moved away, while others only joined quite recently, some students are about to graduate, while younger students have tentatively started dipping their toes into the project to see if they like it) also forces us to remain flexible and “go with the flow”.

One last aspect that determines the way we are able to work within our framework is our intense participation with external partners (social workers, charitable organisations, city governments, theatres, cinemas, film clubs, museum, sports clubs). We are more than happy to adjust our plans to our partners' availabilities, since these workshops guarantee a break from the normal and give our young charges numerous other ways to adapt and integrate. To guarantee that everybody involved gets the most out of the initiatives, we regularly meet up with our partners to work on projects and develop workshops.

Our **Integration in the Environment of the Region** is reflected in the regular meetings with our partners, in various workshops, in generous reportages of the media (see attachment), in our attempts to draw attention to our project by submitting grant applications, in participating in publications to collecting Europe-wide best-practice examples and in our presence at official events such as the Long Night of Participation or TedX, all of which are always committed to by students, teachers and refugees together.