

**Integration
and Culture Project**

**„Interaction of Cultures“
Open Multilingual Theatre Class**



1. Idea of project

Our cultural and integrative association “Verein Gemeinsam” has been performing theatre plays in Austria with its own theatre group since 2012. A multicultural audience showed their interest in what we were doing and began to express their wish for an open and regular theatre class. Consequently, we started to make plans regarding the organisation of such a class as we could clearly recognize the need for leisure and cultural programs with a focus on the integration of people with a migrant background in Austria.

a) Social issues

In recent years, Austria has experienced a strong population growth due to constant immigration. As a result, new societal challenges arise which are considered to be highly problematic. Austrian political parties deal with the issues of integration and the implementation of integration measures on a daily basis, yet they are unable to agree on the best approach. The Austrian population too seems to be at odds with the high immigration rate as 26% of the respondents of a survey conducted by the Gallup institute in the year of 2018 perceived immigration as the most urgent issue of Austria. Conditions like these constitute an ideal environment for the development of racist attitudes which make it especially hard for migrants to feel welcome in Austria.

b) Solution approach

Our theatre project presents an innovative solution approach regarding the difficulties of integration. Additionally, its objective is to counteract the negative depiction of migrants by Austrian media channels. Within the framework of our theatre class we strive to facilitate the familiarisation of migrants with Austrian society in a natural and creative way. Contrary to approaches which use concepts of assimilation we emphasize aspects of inclusion and mutual approach, offering persons of every age and every origin the opportunity to live out and (artistically) express their cultural identity within the protected spaces of the theatre group. Constituting a place of dialogue and encounter, the theatre class is oriented towards the encouragement of the understanding and acceptance of previously unknown lifeworlds and the development of intercultural competences. The interaction between cultures doesn't only enhance the process of making new friends but also fosters the formation of a basis for a peaceful and cooperative coexistence outside the spaces of the theatre.

Regarding innovation we also want to emphasize the aspect of language, which will be treated in more detail further below.

2. The target group

Generally, our target group includes everybody who is interested in intercultural exchange and/or theatre, or who would just like to meet new people. Age, gender and origin have no relevance at all. However, we endeavour to introduce our project to people with a migrant background in particular in order to make it attractive to them as we want to exploit the integrative potentials of theatre. The integrating effects would be a lot less though without the participation of “Austrians”, which is why we are equally happy about everybody’s attendance.

a) Use for the target group

Following the previous outline of the integrative aspects of our project, we would like to go deeper into the linguistic facets at this point, which also form an important part of cultural integration. Perfect knowledge of the German language is no requirement for participation in our class. Instead, everybody is invited to involve his or her own mother language in a creative way to facilitate the free expression of thoughts and feelings. Moreover, in this manner we aim to encourage the focus on non-verbal ways of communication which make the understanding of spoken words irrelevant. However, the class is generally conducted in German to improve the sometimes weak German skills of the attendants.

b) Social appreciation

We contribute to the visualisation of the potential positive impacts of intercultural cooperation on solidarity within Austrian society by displaying the results of our project on public platforms like Facebook and within the framework of cultural events. Furthermore, through the performance of theatre plays which critically treat issues of immigration we enter into a dialogue with the public which is not only enhancing the revelation of the needs and stories of migrants but also communicating the importance of compromise in nowadays’ world.

3. Implementation

We started a test version of our project in June 2018. Initially, it was very uncertain where the road would lead us (if it would lead us anywhere at all), but our plans were very well received and we got great feedback. Consequently, we are organising a theatre class to the present day, which takes place twice a month for the duration of three hours in the premises of a youth centre in the third district of Vienna. The schedule varies from unit to unit, depending on the expressed needs and wishes. Everything is possible, ranging from acting exercises, improvisation theatre to the creation and rehearsal of own theatre plays. Sometimes we are also just having conversations and exchanging each other over a broad range of topics. We are satisfied with the development of our project so far, but are constantly working towards progress to achieve our ends in the near future.

Project description “Verein Gemeinsam – Interaction of cultures“

a) Change of the focus

Besides the integrative aspects, our intention was to form a semi-professional theatre group at first. However, our plan turned out to be hardly feasible as other needs of our target group were more prevalent. As a result, we changed our focus and began to fully concentrate on the purpose of the theatre class as an open platform for the intercultural exchange and the artistic and/or cultural expression.

b) Future prospects

Our future aim is to increase the current effects of our project on the population by providing our participants with more resources for the accomplishment of an integrated and successful life in Austria on the one hand, and by enlarging the public consciousness of the potentials of intercultural cooperation on the other hand. Apart from the theatre class, we are planning to offer educational and career guidance to foster the development of new, future-oriented perspectives. Furthermore, we strive to organise public events and theatrical performances which are centred around diversity to involve more people in our lively dialogue.

We are constantly observing how our attendants feel comfortable, have fun and come out of their shells while they are with us. It is of uttermost importance for us to maintain that effect and to keep providing a platform where everybody feels welcome and safe. We want our participants to be able to take something home from class, no matter if that's new acquaintances, knowledge or beautiful memories.

4. External effects

a) Integration into the environment

Our endeavour is to stay in constant contact with the “outside world” via our online platforms on Facebook and our website and cultural events which are freely accessible for everybody. On the 16th of December, 2018 we organised a celebration having the same name as our project where an international culture program (theatre, music, cuisine) was presented. Our theatre group was enacting scenes and acting exercises from the class and a musical group was performing multicultural musical pieces. Finally, an open buffet gave the opportunity for exchange of views.

b) Cooperation/Financing

Since the beginning of our project we are closely connected to the youth centre which provides us with its rooms for acting and whose visitors regularly attend our classes. Since December 2018 we are also cooperating with the cultural institution Basis.Kultur.Wien which assists us financially and organisationally. Moreover, we aspire to collaborate with the Austrian ministry of culture in the near future.