

COLORED GLASSES – MOVING INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE INTO THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT:

This paper describes a successful project that promotes the intercultural educational value of international exchange to students and youth groups. Colored glasses is a project of the German YFU Committee aiming to enhance intercultural education by providing intercultural learning opportunities to students in primary and secondary education. It addresses the questions of 1) how to promote intercultural understanding within a diverse society without necessarily having the experience of going “abroad”; 2) how to approach students from different educational backgrounds and age-groups; 3) how to take into consideration a society that becomes more and more diverse; and 4) which are the adequate teaching/learning methods.

INTRODUCTION

By offering workshops in intercultural education for high school students, the project *colored glasses* aims at teaching intercultural awareness without physical movement as precondition. The project promotes intercultural understanding *within* a diverse society and *without* going abroad and thus truly ‘moves beyond mobility’.

In a nutshell, the project consist of groups of young volunteers in different parts of Germany who conduct 3-5 hour long workshops for high school students (mostly grades 5-10) in order to sensitize them for topics such as tolerance, stereotypes and discrimination, culture intercultural understanding. In this paper, I will to introduce the project with respect to its history, ideals, methods, and the challenges and opportunities that the project is facing at the moment.

Colored glasses is a project of the German Youth For Understanding Committee (YFU), an organization which mainly conducts long-term high school exchange. The idea for *colored glasses* was developed in 2001 by a group of EVS (European Volunteer Service) volunteers from Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. With support from YFU, they developed the idea for *colored glasses* and put it into practice in Denmark, Estonia and Germany during a period of six months. As a follow-up, individual volunteers from YFU Germany decided to start *colored glasses* as an independent project. After a trial period in Berlin/Brandenburg in 2002, the project was established in three different German states in 2004. Since then, *colored glasses* has consolidated its position as provider of high school workshops in intercultural education: In 2007, 34 workshop were conducted, reaching about 750 students; about 175 volunteers are working in five different regions in Germany.

Financially, the project depends highly on fundraising. In the past years, the project has been sponsored by various organizations (such as Jugend für Europa, PwC, Aktion Mensch, Bayerischer Jugendring, Bündnis für Demokratie und Toleranz, demokratie leben).

IDEAS AND GOALS

Our experience is that intercultural learning and education is made a priority in our education system only formally. In practice, teachers are often not able to integrate ideas and lessons into a tight and fixed curriculum. In addition, the teaching framework often concentrates on gaining knowledge and leaves out the promotion of social and emotional skills that are crucial for the development of intercultural skills. Of course, recognizing the major importance of intercultural learning, the student educational exchange (as offered amongst others by YFU and AFS) is a good opportunity to live in a different culture and experience an intercultural environment. However, for

various reasons many students are not able (often for financial reasons) or willing to participate in such an exchange program; some are not even aware of this option.

Colored glasses acknowledges the fact that intercultural education is too important to be reserved to a small number of students who actually participate in such an educational exchange program. Therefore the project aims at expanding the vision of active intercultural learning to a broader target group. To achieve this vision, we specifically aim at fostering the active promotion of and commitment to cultural diversity, making aware of prejudices related to stereotypes, promoting intercultural understanding and sensitizing to acceptance and tolerance of different cultural values. A side-effect of this vision also lies in the fact that some students who have not seriously considered an educational exchange so far might be inspired by the workshops to do so.

BEHIND THE SCENES – HOW DOES *COLORED GLASSES* WORK?

The structure of the project functions on three levels. The project is headed by an executive team which maintains an overview of the project, deals with financial and strategic decisions, supports the regions, incorporates new regions and organizes nationwide meetings twice a year.

On a regional level, a group of volunteers organizes the acquisition of workshops (for example by contacting schools) and conducts the actual workshops. By realizing our workshop concept these volunteers are at the core of the project. To assure the quality of our workshops, each volunteer has to take part in a training course before conducting a workshop. The volunteers are headed by a regional coordinator: He or she communicates with schools and teachers, arranges the workshop teams, recruits and trains volunteers in two-day seminars, and participates in “nationwide” meetings to coordinate the project as a whole (e.g. evaluation together with executive team). Most of the *colored glasses* volunteers are between the age of 18-25 and alumni of a YFU exchange program, but we also welcome externals with other intercultural experience; *colored glasses* has proven to be of special interest to volunteers who are studying to be teachers.

Besides conducting workshops, another main focus of *colored glasses* is the idea of encouraging, educating, and training young men and women as volunteers. In return for their voluntary and unsalaried commitment, *colored glasses* volunteers are given the opportunity to participate in a project which helps them gain skills themselves; in the project, they can process and evaluate their own intercultural experience, pass on their knowledge, take on responsibility, and gain practice as trainers and group leaders. To interested experienced volunteers we also offer the opportunity to bring in their knowledge by taking part in strategic decisions, nationwide discussions, and development of our concepts.

THE METHODS

The basis for our workshop is the creation of a comfortable working atmosphere in which the participants can discuss as freely as possible. Therefore we follow a peer-to-peer approach: the interaction between a young *colored glasses* team and the participants provides the foundation for a good workshop. All trainers have taken part in some kind of intercultural exchange program themselves, mostly when they were roughly the same age as the participants, and are encouraged to incorporate their experience during the workshops.

All *colored glasses* workshops use an “learning from experience” approach which is complemented by theoretical reflection and which can be subdivided into four stages. Paramount to each workshop is the experience of simulated discrimination or intercultural interaction. Starting from this personal experience the students are asked to reflect on their own behavior by talking about their feelings and thoughts during the simulation without judging them. In a third step, the trainers then provide theoretical framework in order to understand the simulation and deduce an abstract understanding of this personal experience. In the last step, the participants are asked to relate their experience to the theoretical input and discuss the addressed issues and apply the findings of the workshop to their personal day-to-day life. Here, we explicitly encourage the participants to think independently and find solutions themselves.

This approach (which also includes role plays, group discussions, brainstorming, games, etc.) usually excludes a teacher-centered approach as it is much more student-centered in its ideal. For some participants this method is very uncommon and they need some time to get used to it, but in general we get a very positive feedback from the students and teachers concerning the methodology.

After a workshop, the teacher is encouraged to take up the topics addressed in the workshop for further discussions with the class. In addition, we try to act in accordance with specific curricula of the educational system; many schools are obliged to address intercultural awareness and appreciate our workshops as partial fulfillment of their curriculum. With our approach, we hope that we can enable the participants to actively change their perspective and encourage them to reflect on their own culture and on other cultures.

THE WORKSHOPS

The project offers four different kinds of workshops which vary in length from 3-5 hours and are conducted by 2-4 volunteers. Each workshop focuses on a different aspect and, as already mentioned above, the core of each workshop consists of some kind of simulation or interaction. In

addition to that, we use smaller units in order to stress certain aspects addressed in the simulation. In the following, I will introduce some of the units conducted in each workshop.

The first workshop is called “Differences”. In this workshop, the idea of stereotypes and prejudices is addressed by letting participants imagine the life of the German girl Tina and then the life of the Turkish girl Fatima. By doing that, the participants can reflect on stereotypes; the trainers then provide theoretical input on the terminology. The second unit focuses on ethnocentrism by asking the participants to draw a world map. Usually, all students put Germany/Europe in the center of the map. The trainers then show maps from other continents which put their continent in the middle respectively.

The second workshop is called “Just Do It!” and centers around a simulated experience of discrimination. The class is divided in four groups; three groups then get the same task (designing a collage on a specific topic) and some magazines and stationery. One group, though, only gets an incomprehensible work assignment and ‘bad’ material without the others noticing. This discrimination is then evaluated afterwards; trainers give theoretical input on the topic.

The third workshop is named “Bafa Bafa” and consists of a simulation of intercultural contact. The class is divided in two groups; each group represents a culture with certain rules which they practice in different rooms. As soon as the simulation starts, each ‘culture’ welcomes visitors from the other ‘culture’. This visit is difficult and complicated because both cultures’ rules were designed to exclude each other in the first place. In the following discussions each culture is not only asked to evaluate the personal experience but also to explain the other culture’s rules. Possible further discussion topics include: culture, cultural differences, and intercultural communication.

The fourth workshop is called “Building Bridges” and makes use of a simulation (in English-speaking countries known as “The Derdians”) of intercultural contact as well. The class is divided in two groups (the indigenous “Derdians” and European Engineers), both groups have a specific code of conduct. Once the participants have practiced their culture, the engineers have to teach the Derdians how to build a bridge (made with paper, scissors, glue across two tables). Possible discussion topics in the evaluation of the simulation include: culture, cultural differences, stereotypes and prejudices.

In practice, different units of each workshop are often individually combined by the trainers depending on their preference and experience, the given time limit or certain expectations from the teacher or the students.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

We are well aware of the fact that any program or project that claims ‘to teach something’ has to take care of quality. Ever since *colored glasses* has been established as project, we have tried to measure and keep up our quality by applying certain measures. First of all, every *colored glasses*-volunteer needs to have some kind of intercultural experience. In accordance with the peer-to-peer approach focusing on experimental learning, it is important that our trainers themselves are speaking from experience. Secondly, all volunteers have to participate in a training weekend before conducting a workshop. We have developed a written concept for this training which was completed in 2008 and which is applied by all regional coordinators when training their teams.

We have developed rules and guidelines for preparing, conducting and evaluating a workshop. Each workshop must be prepared by the team who trains it well in advance so that every trainer feels secure with the workflow and the content. After the workshop, the trainers gather written and oral feedback from students and teachers and also evaluate the workshop themselves in written form. All evaluation sheets are collected and evaluated each year by the executive team.

One of our most important measures of quality are the nationwide meeting held by the executive team and the regional coordinators in order to evaluate, plan the future, and – last but not least – motivate each other.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The project has functioned successfully for six years now. Naturally we are also facing certain challenges and opportunities which I would like to address in the following. Besides our everyday work, we there are two major developments that are likely to shape our project in the years to come.

First, we have entered a cooperation with the Union German Youth Hostels. The idea behind this “Lighthouse Project” is a close cooperation between a local group of volunteers in the Eastern part of Germany with specific youth hostels. The workshops that are conducted for groups of students staying at the hostels are primarily planned to be bi- and multilateral workshops. This model project aims at creating new workshop programs for a new target group (mixed student groups) in a new environment (youth hostels) with the theoretical and practical experience of *colored glasses*. The project was planned for three years (2007-2009) and we will gather and evaluate the results in 2009. Especially the multilateral emphasis of this project provides a great opportunity to gather more workshop experience outside of the classroom and with students that come from different countries.

While the “Lighthouse Project” does not influence our everyday work in the regions, our ‘target group discussion’ has been concerning everybody within the project for quite some time now. *Colored glasses* aims specifically at students who will not go abroad during high school. In

fact, within the German three-tiered school system, we mostly conduct workshops in upper level secondary education (so-called *Gesamtschulen* and *Gymnasien*). We have collected experience with other school forms, but have repeatedly discussed offering more workshops on lower level education (especially in the so-called *Hauptschulen*).

In accordance with current discussions in various areas of the German society, we feel the need to address specifically ‘underprivileged’ students on lower level secondary education. Especially in those schools diversity is a major issue, as many classes consist of students with from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Our own experience in those schools is diverse: some workshops went very well, but other times the volunteers felt that they could not work well with the group and could not engage the students’s participation. When the famous “Rütli Schule”¹ (*Hauptschule*) asked us for a workshop, we decided to meet with the teachers first to discuss with them our workshop concept and ideas. This fruitful meeting led the teachers to evaluate our workshops as “too academic”, meaning that the workshops relied too much on the ability of thinking in abstract terms, of reflecting thoroughly and on a high level verbalized level. They came to the conclusion that our workshops might not work in *Hauptschulen*, at least not in their school.

If we started adjusting our concept and our methodology to these students, we would be facing several problems: a large majority of our trainers has no personal experience in the area of lower level education; most of them went to a school which qualified them for university. Thus, we would need input from professionals (teachers or other professionals in lower level education) on our questions: How do we approach students from different cultural and educational backgrounds? How can we adjust our concept to other school forms? Where do we get (theoretical) support and input on the matter? Which are adequate teaching/learning techniques? How can we train our volunteers for the needs and challenges of other school forms?

For 2009, we are planning to start out by getting a clearer picture of the problem. We have hired an intern who will select and provide theoretical and professional input in order to start the discussion on a good basis. At the same time, volunteers who are interested in this matter will gain more workshop experience in lower level education schools. The entire ‘sub-project’ will be led by a working group whose task will be to come up with a viable plan which will enable us to provide workshops for the specific target group and actively address diversity issues and ‘underprivileged’ students in different school forms.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Since the very beginning, *colored glasses* has been a project which sparked a lot of interest and positive feedback and which seems to have hit the nerve of recent discussions concerning the educational system and the growing diversity within our culture. On the one hand, the project is still growing – three new regions could be incorporated in 2008 – and we can rely on a large number of experienced and trained volunteers. As pointed out above, we are also turning towards new ideas in order to develop new perspectives. On the other hand, we keep struggling with the high level of fluctuation of volunteers, as probably many other projects and organizations are as well. Although the concrete causes can only be subject to speculation at the moment, young men and women seem to have less and less time to devote to voluntary activities as they are more and more driven to carefully plan their future careers in a highly competitive society. High school and university students respectively – and that is the background of most of our volunteers – cannot afford active commitment to social, cultural, or political issues without cutting back on their own education and career. The situation is further complicated by the fact that many of them still are expected to have been involved in such voluntary activities, for example when applying for a scholarship. We hope for the future that young people will still be able to commit themselves while receiving adequate recognition and acknowledgment at the same time.

Notes

¹ This school in Berlin became the focus of nationwide public discussions in 2006 and the symbol for the difficult position of Germany's lower level education: Its exhausted and overstrained teachers sent an open letter to the city's senate asking for help. In this letter, they described their helplessness when dealing with aggressive, violent, and disillusioned students. In addition, the percentage of students with a migration background added up to 83.2 %. For a discussion in English cf. YOUNG, Marc (04/05/2006). „Letter From Berlin. Germany's School of Hard Knocks“. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,409876,00.html> (last visited 01/28/2009). By now, the situation has improved a lot – partially due to the public interest which encouraged a lot of support.

Biography

Kim Seifert went with YFU's student exchange program to the United States in 1999/2000. She helped establish *colored glasses* in 2003 and has worked as volunteer in the executive team ever since. After completing a university degree in Comparative Literature, American Studies and Cultural Anthropology, she is currently studying for her PhD.