

## Internet-project work iT!

### Reflections on Participative Project Work

The world is changing. Austria will certainly not gain any footing in global competition through the speed of its hands, but rather through that of its minds. Continued education is just as sought-after as the ability to act autonomously and competently. Positions which used to be rather straightforward now place ever-rising demands on individuals. In an effort to meet these demands, project learning is deployed in seminars, at school, at universities, at companies etc. more and more often. For quite some time now, it is customary for businesses to instigate project work. They most often do so where change is necessary. Moreover, it somehow seems today that one's own life, her or his story, has developed into a sort of "project," or a number of smaller projects – for example in the form of precarious working conditions or in the form of a "patchwork career."

Such forms of employment as project work proffer refugees added chances for their future: through them, they can be gently eased into the Austrian (working) culture. Despite all globalization: Austria is unique. American as much as Japanese managers are prepared for being expatriates in Austria: be it the relation of hierarchy and power, be it the individual versus the collective - every country has its own culture, without making it less economically successful. This in mind, project work can also help acquaint foreigners with local perspectives regarding work, leadership and the like.

### Paying Respect to the Cultural Background of the Participants

Because refugees hail from other countries, it is to be expected that they bring with them other customs, conventions, manners, and, above all, routines when conducting themselves in social settings. Unfortunately, this aspect is often overlooked. Customs and conventions are something one can learn rather quickly. However, the development of a culture-specific perspective on what happens takes time. Very often such definitions of the situation are closely connected to fundamental aspects of one's own identity. And, who can honestly say that they enjoy forsaking parts of themselves?

However, successful project work with refugees does not requisite a knowledge and understanding of all cultures of the participants. Rather, it has more to do with seeing the conduct of the participants with new eyes - ones not skewed by Austrian views and perspectives. One should keep in mind's eye that the participants may have other motivations and may act against the backdrop of different values than oneself. Project work is quite often deeply affected by cultural diversity. This diversity enriches the work, but for example if participants have a different image of school and learning based upon their educational biography, then they at first might not see project work as just another form of learning. As project work is also often accompanied with new styles of leadership, team work, time management etc., it is also at beginning not often identified as work. During the process, refugees, therefore, have to realise project work as a specific form of learning and working, to acquire appropriate modes of conduct to help them succeed in such endeavours – and project work, for its part in design, methods etc., must also respect and support this participant's process. Only a state of mutual respect and collaboration can alter life-long learning habits.

### Keeping the Special Circumstances of Refugees in Mind

Many refugees are quite eager to learn. They are glad to take advantage of any courses and educational offers that they can get their hands on. However, project work, which is so often not really perceived as learning, runs into many roadblocks: a person can't just have a seat, take a few notes, and then jet off home. In project work, you must do something, take responsibilities on your shoulders, and you must take a stand.

However, the experiences one should have in effective project work are diametrically opposed to the experiences asylum seekers must cope with: first, the experience of being stripped of one's rights during asylum proceedings and, second, the experience of being a complete outsider in Austria. At the present time, refugees in Austria can't even make decisions about their own diet. Every single decision is made for them and they can/may/must do nothing from morning till night but wait. It is no wonder they project their

experiences onto such "official" projects. At the same time, many asylum seekers do not want to attract any undue attention: in a foreign and as yet still enigmatic country, where deportation is lurking around every corner, this could be quite dangerous. Quite often refugees are all too familiar with these dangers based on experiences in their homelands. In a foreign country, self-determination and the taking on of responsibilities (instead of just keeping a low profile and going with the flow) can seem extremely perilous.

Participative project work is antagonized by many paradoxical issues: it is vexed by the previous individual life histories of the participants, while at the same time being disturbed by participants' negative encounters with people who view them as a "dangerous foreigner" in Austria.

## Learning from Others: Project Leadership, Coaches, and Others

In such situations, the people leading the project have a deep significance. They are role models - both in their own capacity to work and learn and in their aptitude to lead others. Through project leaders, refugees get to know an Austrian perspective of what happens presently. Participative project work does not mean "anything goes" nor does it have a laissez-faire philosophy. On the contrary, the management of such a project must have clear contours and be well-structured to facilitate confrontation on the difference of the cultures involved, and to enable mutual perspective taking.

Because the managers of participative projects have a hands-on approach and work along-side the other participants, they are often not even perceived as the project's leaders. Such a demeanour is in stark contrast to everything the refugees have experienced before. On account of this potential danger, the framework and boundaries of the project itself must be clearly set by the project leaders. Within this framework, it should be clear to project participants that they can trust the project leaders: for instance, that they can come to them with suggestions for improvement (i.e. criticism) and not be terminated. After the first stage of learning how to practice constructive criticism, the participants can move onto the next: realizing that the project's leaders are not almighty or omnipotent and that they can assume many responsibilities (for the project and also in their own life span) themselves.

Ideally, the participants should meet various project leaders so that they can form an impression of commonalities existent in Austrian culture. Remember: participants always have a watchful eye on how the project leaders conduct themselves and as a team. They register everything and a picture of "Austrian culture" slowly begins to take shape.

Of course, refugees should also learn leadership by being in charge of some team work. Yet the project's leadership should not forget that there is a real difference in power as only they have the practical knowledge of how things in Austria really operate. Only during the course of such an empowering project can such knowledge gaps slowly be filled in.

## "Meaning" - The Pivotal Point of any Participative Project

One of the most important tasks of the project's leadership is that they give meaning to the whole endeavour. The actual meaning of the project itself and the doors it opens for project participants is something they come to comprehend only by degrees. The project is not formal schooling (as is the case in a course) nor is it actual employment (there is neither a boss or a salary). Many participants may ask themselves, "Wherein lays the use then?" Above all, the project is filled with apparent dangers: an individual must leave his or her shell and accomplish something in a foreign country often perceived as a hostile one. Add that to having to fulfil this task in a group of people from a variety of other countries, often with different allegiances, and the predicament becomes clear.

It is the task of the project's leadership to take the cultural heritage of the participants into consideration. When trying to make the meaning of the project clear, they must bear the current situation of refugees in Austria in mind. The project's leadership must head the endeavour with exemplary conduct. They should nurture proper communication amongst the groups and develop a suitable project design. From the onset, the management of the project should be transparent and offer a guiding light.

Reflection techniques are one method which works especially well to help these objectives be achieved. They help to make one conscious of the current state of affairs and to analyse one's surroundings more closely. Naturally, the leadership must help to safeguard the group from making false estimations. Individuals should also learn to reflect upon their own actions and conduct.

Reflection techniques do not, however, exist only to define group dynamics and the status quo: it is essential that the results of such techniques be used to make changes and modifications, that they form the next step and actions. Only when reflection techniques have a concrete reference to the project and when their results are actually implemented, do they make sense for course participants.

## The Methods of Project Operation

If the group is cultural heterogeneous, then the project work should take place in the local language. Visualizing techniques and letting the participants' make own experiences and try for themselves does support this. Initially, the structure of the team work should be relatively preset and the participants should be given enough assurance (for example, talks should start in small rather than large groups). If refugees are gently eased into the process, one can later use a variety of methods.

Certain planning techniques and their visualization are especially useful for participation in the project: for example, graphs charting the various stages and milestones of the project or the degrees of completion of work packages. Participants respond especially well to methods in which they are active (for instance, feedback and fantasy rounds, and methods where they must use a ball, stone or a ball of wool) and to methods which incorporate the body.

In regards to the body and its positioning in a room, there are many exercises which can be implemented (e.g. during an introductory session, the participants might be instructed to get in a line according to how long they've been in Austria; or they might be asked to go to one side of the room or the other depending on whether or not they come from the country or the city).

Even more important are methods which help to structure speech and enable the participants to express themselves. Such methods include: introducing oneself in one's mother tongue during an introductory session or pairing up one's name with an adjective that starts with the same letter. It is of course crucial that everyone joins in as, for example, in the card enquiry method in a brainstorming process.

Such methods which incorporate creativity (through drawing or with objects) are especially suitable. They can be utilized during team reflections or in planning and offer those less well-versed in the German language a chance to express themselves. They also allow individuals to acquire skills in their ability to plan and reflect.

Methods used must take participants' ability to concentrate into consideration. With this in mind, work should also fluctuate between working alone, in small groups or in large clusters.

## Self-determination and Empowerment as Inherent Goals

Project participants have many challenges ahead of them. They have the dual hindrance of previous cultural encounters in their homeland (which are often radically different than those awaiting them here) coupled with the burdens of their refugee status in Austria. They must fight against a fundamental doubt in their own ability to interact successfully with Austrians in an unstructured situation, e.g. to ask others for help and assistance - something which is not always easy to do.

On the other hand, the potential of the Austrian project leadership (for example, the coaches) is totally over-estimated. (People often believe they can organize everything from an apartment to community service through just a phone call or a personal contact.) Work with refugees is often ambushed by doing too much for the participants against the background of a lack of self-initiative and the expectation of failure of themselves, which does not change their position nor their capacity to help themselves. Thus, it is best to build upon the small successes of the individual participant her- or himself. Group work in which positive experiences can be made speeds up the process of self-determination and empowerment.

The participants' resistance against making mistakes in a foreign surrounding cannot be underestimated. They have no desire to experience yet another let-down - and one at their own hands at that. Interestingly enough, the planning of the website was much less problematic for the refugees. This is because the consequences of their actions only had an outcome in the "virtual" world. The participants had an easier time of things whenever project work took place shut away from their Austrian surroundings (such as when they worked wholly amongst themselves or in cyberspace). Of course, the project's leadership had to work against any such trends towards isolation in anticipation of integration into the regular labour market. Project participants had to learn to take responsibility for their actions and achievements. Learning to accept short-comings and admitting mistakes is also part of the process: one can often only learn through mistakes, and the project leadership has to allow that.

By Empowerment, asylum seekers are put in the position of deciding for themselves what they need for a successful (labour market) integration. An empowering society trusts asylum seekers and their capacity to persevere, and it supports them with all its might.