



School Magazine on the Blog: Children Communicate Beyond Frontiers

Emilia Bran¹, Cristina Dragomir¹, Kanaan Qashour, Cristina Apostol¹,
Alexandra Manasoi¹

Abstract

In October 2015, as part of an assignment in our master program, we started an online youth magazine with contributions of children from the three schools we teach in. The schools belong to quite diverse communities in Romania. The participants are from middle school and come from different grades. Our first objective was to bring together children from different environments and offer a context where they could express genuinely and develop communication as well as intercultural competences in a meaningful way. Thus the sections of the magazine were discussed and set together and they encompass the children's current interests.

At the beginning of the second semester the scope of our project expanded with the help of an international student from our university and some Syrian school children. Consequently our objective extended in order to give Romanian and Syrian children the opportunity to see each other's works despite the distance in space and culture.

The current shape of the magazine is a pdf on a blog that can be easily accessed by all the participants. It includes seven sections with texts, drawings and poems written by the pupils from both countries. The names of the sections and the captions are in Romanian, Arabic and English.

Interestingly enough, beyond frontiers and cultural differences, the magazine reveals several similarities between the works of the children from Romania and those from Syria, such as the way in which the houses were drawn or the sky was represented in a visual form. The themes in their poems were very much similar as well, like poems about the love for their mothers, or fairy tale characters. Though the environment in which they live in is very much different, the resemblances are astonishing. Our paper is intended to detail the results of the project as well as to present the partnership that was created within the framework of a simple digital tool that enhances the opportunity for the children to express their creativity, not only by elaborating the articles in the magazine, but also by helping us as a team to design it.

1. Introduction: "The Adventure Transfer"

The idea of a school magazine started from the project assignment we got as 1st year grads in an Intercultural Studies master program at the University of Ploiesti, Romania. For our fall semester 2015 we were supposed to learn by doing within the Project Writing and Management courses, i.e. we had to work in groups in order to design and implement an intercultural project at our workplace/ in the university/ in our neighborhood/ community. For the spring semester we had to evaluate, revise and carry on the project or change it if the expected results could not be reached.

The assignment seemed a scary and difficult academic "adventure". It had to bring about palpable results and we found it impossible to even think of a topic, let alone a target group, where we could make a difference in terms of intercultural issues. Then, we realized that the challenge was actually quite important in the three schools we work for as language teachers. Two of these schools are small in size and are located in rural communities, one of which includes a rather important Roma minority; the third one is in a small town but is part of a larger establishment that also comprises a high school. Primarily there seemed to be no real common ground among our groups of students, no communication opportunities besides the national language curriculum we need to teach and the pupils' low motivation and attainment, that we, teachers, talk about and struggle to improve on a daily basis. But is that the only common denominator among our diverse pupils from diverse backgrounds? The initial discussion in our project team brought about some extra convergences: they are all children who grew up in a digital world [5], who are very fond of digital devices and social media and use them more than textbooks and notebooks [4,5], who experience marginalization in various circumstances [1], that are all connected to their school life (i.e. they are village kids, or they are middle schoolers among high schoolers, or they are Roma, or they are girls, or their parents cannot afford to buy them the last android, etcaetera-etcaetera). To sum up, the students might be part of one diverse target

¹ University of Ploiești, Romania

group who are not the most successful in school, are not very motivated, who experience marginalization and are fond of ICT. Could we use the latter to help them do better?

While trying to answer this question, we devised the school magazine on the blog. It had the potential to make the students desire to: develop pieces that could be good enough to share online [5], participate in an exchange of artifacts that are personal and engaging [2,3] that sustain motivation and learning within the digital medium they are fond of. Thus, our first project objective was to bring together children from different environments and offer a context where they could express genuinely and develop communication as well as intercultural competences in a meaningful way. At that point our not so thrilling “academic adventure” had become our “school magazine adventure”. Basically we turned our project assignment in the grad school in a project-within-the-project. And since we had already understood that a *project* is not something *about* but goal-oriented work on behalf of the project team, we involved the children in the design and organization of the magazine. In the fall 2015 the classes we worked with were invited to think about committing to the project. Twenty five children stepped in: six (grades V and VII) from the rural school in Ditești (Prahova county), nine (grades V, VI, VIII) from another rural school (Marginenii de Jos, same county) and ten (grades V, VI, VIII) from the highschool in Slanic. The spring issue 2016 expanded internationally and among the contributors we could count eight Syrian children thanks to the involvement of an international student from our University.

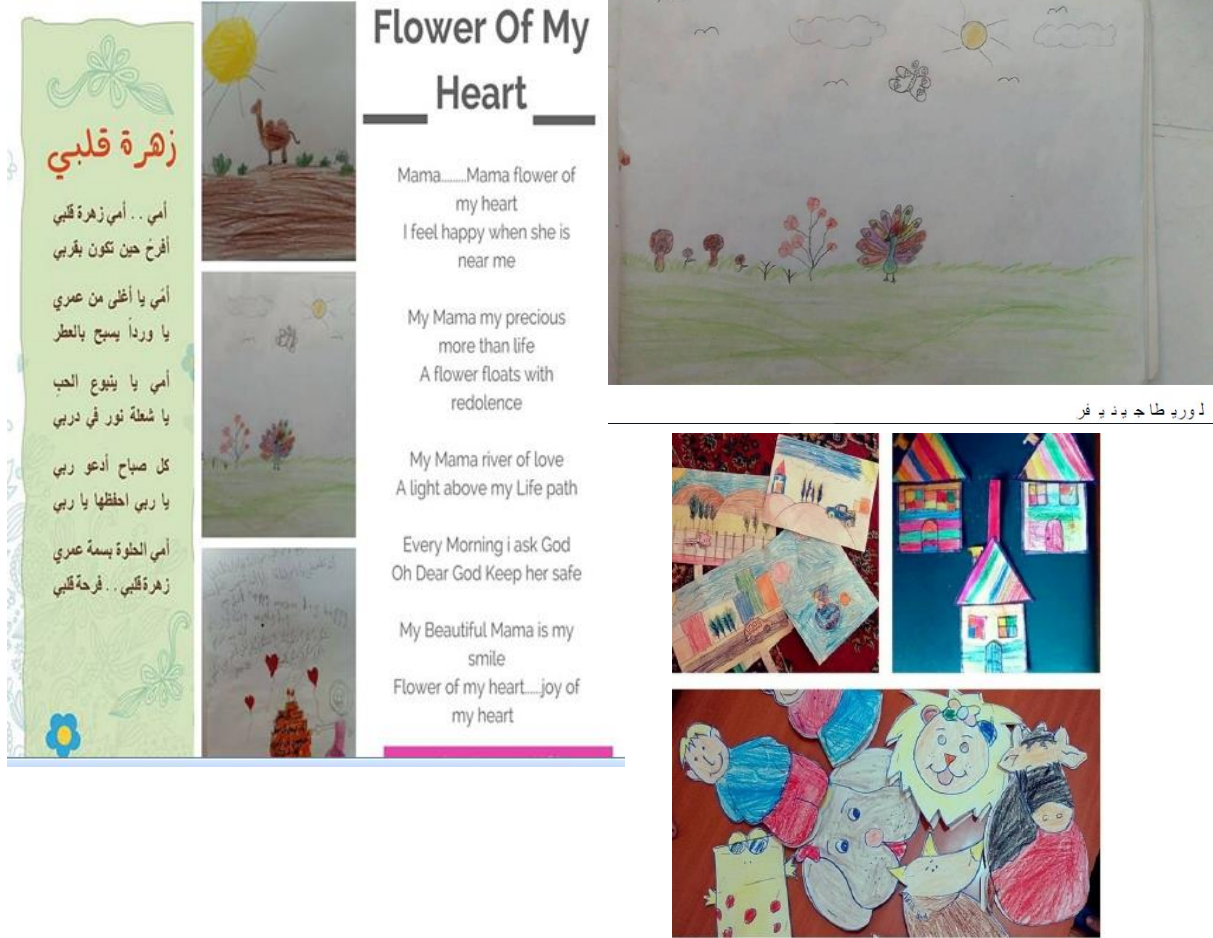
2. Project organization: participation, work, imagination

We had to develop a school magazine that was to be made by kids and represent them. But ‘How do we make a magazine?’ Here is the analogy we used with our pupils in order to introduce them to the enterprise: ‘A magazine is like a building that is built according to blue prints, only that it is not made of bricks, but of words, and sometimes, of colors or drawings; add work and energy, and stir your imagination and creativity!’. Since that was the case, we discussed with the three groups of students about their current interests. We got to a genuine slice of pre-teen and early-teen culture that spans from verbal and visual expression towards exploring the unknown and having fun. After several discussion rounds we agreed on the following sections: The adventure of the words; Art across the world; Did you know...?; Do it yourself; Signs and symbols; Anecdotes. We also agreed that this particular magazine will be a digital edition, a solution that has many advantages: it is *cool*, it is environmentally friendly, it is free, it can be viewed by lots and lots of pupils/ people who click on it, irrespective of their location, it can make us famous! (by all means we go public for everyone to see the results of our work and we take the spotlight!).

The children developed the desired artifacts (whatever they felt like they wanted to share in the magazine) and submitted them to a group evaluation. The editors made the final check and supervised the structure. The best products were included in the final issue which was uploaded onto the blog. For the fall issue we had a partly bilingual magazine (Romanian and English). For the spring issue we had a more elaborated editorial work since we also had some pieces in Arabic that were partly translated into English and Romanian (names of sections, captions, and some poetry).

3. Results

Firstly, there are the two “palpable” results: two issues of a school magazine that expanded to an international multilingual piece of online publishing. They can be read here: <http://cuvintesicreioane.blogspot.com/>. What did we notice from this experience? Initially the school magazine was based on the idea that we could help children from different schools and environments bring their ideas, thoughts and works of art together. The bonus is that we also brought people together. Sometimes it is hard to unify people of same nationality and beliefs, let alone when all these differ. Our online school magazine enabled us to break cultural and geographical boundaries and to teach children how to see the similarities among people by enjoying the differences in their way of expressing themselves. The sky can be blue or red in a painting but both views can be breathtaking, the words we use to describe our feelings may be different but the feelings as such are equally intense. Children learned this on their own, by personal discovery, without being told or taught. Moreover, plenty of the artifacts are eerily similar despite what we normally expect given the cultural differences [4]. See, for instance, in the illustrations below how children represent landscapes and houses (Fig.1).



Nedu Bianca, cls. a VI-a

Fig. 1: A selection of artifacts (2nd issue)

Secondly, the results we obtained mirror the goals we set in the beginning: giving students their “space” to exhibit their work, the chance of being known among their schoolmates and outside the school, making them familiar with what mass-media means and how it can spread knowledge, giving students memorable memories and a sense of pride for being appreciated for their work, a fun alternative to regular school activities, the privilege of knowing people they could not have met otherwise just through their work. The blog takes no sides. It is a common ground where children of different ages, social status and nationality bring together similar expectations, dreams, ideas palpable work and knowledge.

From one issue to the next there may not be many differences, but with perspective in mind this project can be more than a school magazine or a blog. It can become a playing yard where the only thing that matters is sharing. There are only children with enough courage and open mindedness to chase their dreams and beliefs on an equal ground.

4. Conclusion

Through the school magazine, we managed to highlight that imagination and creativity are beyond frontiers. This could be clearly seen in drawings and poems (see the way in which the houses were drawn, or the sky represented in the samples in Fig. 1). The interesting part was the fusion of Romanian, English and Arabic languages which brought an intercultural as well as a multilingual perspective to the school magazine. We can say that the result of our project is:

- a common spot for all children who have something to say, show, ask;
- an expression practice and an exchange of ideas and information in fields that permeate youth culture



- a meaningful, friendly way to learn and practice communication
- a practice in media work, that can be valuable for the students' future

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