"I Am a Cultural Producer": An Educational Project to Create Culture Actively and Collaboratively

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Abstract

How does culture shape our daily life? What makes culture? Does culture "just" happen or is it actively produced? If so, how and by whom? Can anyone of us produce culture? How do we create "cultures of participation" [1]? And how can young people initiate a public discourse on their participation in cultural questions? Such questions have been the starting point for an innovative educational project developed within a university course. The project results in a discursive event with the general public coupled with various artistic and cultural interventions in the city of Salzburg. Students of „Arts Management & Cultural Production" [6] at the University of Salzburg collaboratively developed a mediation concept as well as posters, jingles and zines as interventions. In this paper we take the concept of "participatory culture" [3] as a basis to show how it can be used as an open and dynamic learning concept to develop concrete projects not only in media-pedagogic and online contexts – as it has been done so far – but also, and particularly, in the field of contemporary art and for developing cultural interventions in "real" space. The objective of "I am a cultural producer" is to discuss possibilities and challenges in developing and realizing innovative educational projects with the goal of actively and collaboratively creating "cultures of participation" [1].

1. Introduction

The city of Salzburg is known by its historic center, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and by its annual culture highlight, the Salzburg Festival. In contrast to – and in the context of - this local cultural space, we have initiated a process-oriented educational project, which focuses on the discussion of culture as part of daily life and of artistic interventions as opportunities for civic engagement. Self-organization and collaborative production of participants' knowledge – in this case students - interventions within the urban space, as well as encouraging public participation has been the key objectives for the conception of "I am a Cultural Producer".

The analysis of the „circuit of culture" [2, p.3] plays a key role in this educational project. It describes the (public) communication process where cultural meanings are formed or consolidated by means of five major cultural processes. Paul du Gay's et al. model specifies these five levels as representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. They are related to each other and form a cycle in which each level is intertwined with one another. Consequently, culture can be understood as a dynamic process in which points of view and preferences are being produced, absorbed and are then distributed in a cyclical public process. According to this approach, known as a "circuit of culture", societies, groups and individuals are continuously re-producing, re-negotiating and participating in the production of culture [10]. This results in our central research questions: How, within the context of the above circuit, is it possible that everyone can actively shape culture? In what ways do we encounter culture in everyday life? How does culture shape our daily life? What are the characteristics of culture? Does culture take place or is it being produced actively? If so, how and by whom? And above of all: Can everyone of us produce culture?

The process of active learning, as well as critical reflection and collaborative problem-solving are inherent in the educational project's subject matter itself. The objective has been to use the concept of a "participatory culture" [3] as a starting point and transfer the therein-stated principles to the course. Henry Jenkins et al.'s key study "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture" [3] describes it as being a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, where people act as active contributors and participants in culture and media production. They support each other within networks and communities, therefore sharing and passing on knowledge by informal mentorship [3, p.3]. Until recently, the concept has been discussed mainly in the context of media pedagogy and in terms of online developments: within this educational project it has been applied to the possible interventions in the area of contemporary arts and within "real" space [5].

2. The educational project

Together with a heterogeneous group of students from different fields of study the subject matter of actively and publicly producing culture was not only discussed, but the curriculum design as well as a mediation concept were also developed. This enabled us to discuss possible answers with the Salzburg public and to create a space for communication and action about the topic of active cultural production. In the course of two semesters we were dealing with questions outlined above (from October 2011 until May 2012). Following a workshop that introduced the term "cultural production" by researching mainly artistic interventions, but also by studying scientific literature, we asked ourselves who a cultural producer is, or could be. Having collected various options and evaluating them, we followed Raymond William's or the cultural studies' concept that perceives culture primarily as lived everyday culture [7], and the definition of the UNESCO: "Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs." [8, n.p.]

In addition, three workshops given during the first part of the educational project exemplified what the work of cultural producers looks like and at the same time provided application-oriented knowledge with regards to the production of jingles, posters and zines. This methodological knowledge was supposed to serve as a basis for the second part of the project that contained the practical implementation of media. At the same time, the purpose of the project was to encourage students to enjoy the process of creating and being pro-active within the community.

At the end of the first part and in order to prepare for the summer semester, students outlined a concept for a joint project on "I am a cultural producer". We organized a round table as well as a complementary exhibition to form the framework for the 50-year anniversary celebrations of the Salzburg University. On the one hand, it was the students' task to develop ideas in terms of how to prepare for these two events in terms of content and on the other hand, students were required to outline a schedule for the preparations and the on-going project development. This assignment resulted in a wide range of ideas. Among others the following – additional – suggestions were handed in: a separate task group for public relations to be established, social media to be integrated into the concept of the events and speech bubbles to appear as the "logo" of the overall project.

There was also a lot of discussion about the (future) course of communication itself and ideas regarding self-organisation were drawn up: in addition to the meetings on site, the blog (www.kulturmanagement-salzburg.at), the page on Facebook (www.facebook.com/Kulturproduzentinnen) and Google Docs, to name a few, were meant to reinforce the informal exchange.

For the summer semester the actual project development was on schedule: firstly, students re-organised themselves as "the cultural producers" and as a collective of specialists, they set out to put the intended project into practice. The event itself confirmed the professional and dedicated preparations: already a day ahead as well as on the day of the event curiosity and excitement was created by locally distributing balloons and postcards, as well as through small interventions throughout the city: jingles were played in arcades, stickers were applied to posters and on public locations (with permission) and in advance a discourse via online- and offline-media was initiated. Numerous guests joined the event, ranging from the Salzburg public, families, students, passengers, culturally interested people, artists, friends and acquaintances, all of whom were guests and took part in the June 2, 2012 discussions. Using postcards, the audience's statements were collected and discussed at the round table.

Many participants also became actively involved in a zine-workshop that took place at the same time.

The central questions revolving around the round table were "What does it mean to produce culture?" "When do you produce culture?" and "What does culture mean to you?". Speakers of various disciplines and cultural sectors debated with students in this facilitated discussion to express widely varied approaches and viewpoints. Two out of the eight seats on the podium – lounge chairs in a public car park – were reserved for the audience. In the course of the discussion consensus was reached that culture can be found in many daily actions and in order to be able to perceive them as culture, these actions need to be consciously reflected upon first.

A documentation of the event as well as the project development were the subjects of an exhibition shown from June 14 until September 26, 2012 at the county of Salzburg's gallery of the Office of Equal Opportunity, Anti-Discrimination and Advancement of Women.

3. Aims and methods: Active learning in the context of a "participatory culture"

The central requirement during the conception of the process-oriented educational project had been phrased easily: in addition to passing on the theoretical and factual knowledge, creative and problem-solving strategies should be evoked through critical reflection and self-activity. Therefore, from the very beginning, the project was designed to be an open, self-organized learning process and a moderated project.

Adopting a methodology of active learning we attempted to implement the following parameters within the teaching project, loosely following the four types of a "participatory culture" – affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem-solving und circulations [3, n.p.]:

- **Affiliations (for building a temporary "community"):** Due to the discursive character and the clear focus towards a common goal, a sense of belonging to the project as well as the group quickly arose. By means of various tasks, students were instructed to generate a collective perspective that was supposed to accumulate a variety of individual opinions within a common meta-perspective. This collaborative act of constructing meaning based on individual viewpoints and beliefs led to the formation of the group called "the cultural producers". Thus perceiving oneself as a part of a community was formally expressed. As a group, the students took on the exact same "collective accountability", [9, p. 75] which was required to generate common cultural meaning.

- **Expressions (as productively constructing new cultural forms):** Through the students' independent "production of culture" and by trying out various possibilities of participation and intervention, the transfer from the acquisition of knowledge into application-oriented concepts had been achieved. In order to develop the concept, it was necessary to reflect the knowledge gained on "cultural production" with regards to transferring knowledge into a (comprehensive) everyday context and to combine it with productive methods, such as the creation of zines, posters, social media, jingles and so on. This self-activity of students deepened the process of understanding.

- **Collaborative problem-solving (as a communal process):** A key result of the educational project was the definition of "cultural production", as well as the collaboratively developed realization of the event. In order to reach a collective meta-perspective, it was necessary to negotiate meaning within a dynamic process of the group. For this purpose a lot of space for discourse and facilitated conversations was required. This process of negotiation called for the continuous articulation and reflection of one's own views and encouraged students' abilities to cooperate with one another and have debates.

- **Circulations (as part of promoting circulation processes):** The framework was extended around and into the public as well as into communal space through PR-Activities (by means of Facebook entries, a separate blog and finally the public transfer via the event as well as the exhibition): already in advance a public discourse had been initiated by means of "small" interventions throughout the city. Thereby, the attention should not only be on the round table, but individuals' participation that had been the subject of the event, should also be made possible. The students ensured that the round table was barrier-free and publicly easily accessible. In addition, the public circulation process was encouraged beyond the local context by online forums.

4. Conclusion: From collaborative knowledge production to participatory spaces of civic engagement

The key finding of „I am a Cultural Producer" was that socially ambitious educational and learning projects require an open and dynamic space for reflection and action. Only such spaces enable the production of collaborative knowledge and processes of participatory learning. This is the foundation needed to initiate communication and negotiation processes: as formulated in the concept of Cultural Citizenship – which enables "the competent participation in symbolic resources of society" [4, p. 103]

Therefore, in our conclusion we agree with Henry Jenkins et al.: they call for the central integration of cultural knowledge into the curricula of educational programs that follow the guidelines of a "participatory culture" [3]. This strategy calls for an open and dynamic character when developing an educational project, as shown in "I am a Cultural Producer", as well as a transformed understanding of the role of the teaching staff': for us, being a teacher meant being a moderator who leads through the process of collaboratively creating knowledge, rather than being an expert and provider of knowledge. While having perceived ourselves as being moderators, we also saw ourselves as mentors who could be contacted for help if required and who encouraged the participants' self-determination and their

sense of responsibility. Additionally, the open structures during the conception of the curriculum and the classes needed to be flexible during the process of collaboratively producing knowledge.

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