



Social Art for Social Inclusion under Special Conditions: Modification and Impact of a Theatre Approach for Promoting Employability, Entrepreneurship and Language Learning during the Pandemic

Best, Christine

Sozialforschungsstelle, Faculty for Social Sciences, TU Dortmund University, Germany

Abstract

Not only traditional educational institutions such as schools and universities were faced with the problem of maintaining their teaching during the Corona Shutdown. Also, other adult and youth education institutions outside the state-run options that pursue alternative educational approaches had to adapt to the new circumstances in order to remain capable of acting. In this paper, the author will highlight, based on the results of the Erasmus+ project "ArtE - The Art of Employability", the practical work with the ArtE approach that was affected by the pandemic. The aim of the article is to answer the question how the approach was modified and what its impact was. In ArtE, approaches and effects of social art in the field of adult education were researched and successfully applied to strengthen the employability of young adults. The modification of the social art method and their effect on the participants were recorded with the help of participative observation, a project diary as well as questionnaires for the self-assessment of the participants and spotlight interviews with trainers and participants. The analysis showed that there were problems in accessing the participants and there were problems to continue with the learning process. Nevertheless, there was a positive impact on the participants' personal development in terms of soft skills, self-confidence and use of language. Therefore, the alternative educational approach of social art has reacted flexibly to a wide variety of problems, and to some extent the effectiveness of the teaching processes did not necessarily have to be limited.

Keywords: Social Art, social inclusion, theatre, language learning, migrant inclusion, entrepreneurship

1. Introduction and Background

Youth unemployment is a particularly serious problem in southern Mediterranean Europe [1]. Based on the Social Art approach [2], [3], the project ArtE reacts to that fact, trying to help young people in getting access to the labour market by combining methods of theatre pedagogy with social work, job coaching and entrepreneurship training. As performative methods are especially reliant on social interaction, the Corona-Pandemic completely changed the established way of working with the participants. Against this background, this article examines how European institutions of youth and adult education, without state affiliation, dealt with the pandemic challenges. The main question of the paper is how the Social Art approach was implemented during the pandemic under these special conditions and what effect it had on the participants. To answer this question, we will first introduce the approach of Social Art and then explain the methodology used for this paper. Following, the pilot projects in Spain and Italy are introduced and the implementation of the method under pandemic conditions is described, before the implementation and impact of the method are analysed.

In ArtE, six European organisations from Italy, Spain, Portugal and Germany work on improving the employability of young people and integrating them into the labour market. During the two and a half years of the project, six-week pilot projects are conducted with young unemployed people in each country. At the time of writing, one project in Germany, two pilot projects in Italy and one pilot project in Spain have already been carried out. All pilot projects consist of several weeks of theatre training, culminating in a stage-ready premiere in front of an audience. In addition to the theatre training, job coaching sessions are held with the participants and opportunities for training, a job or an internship are explored and applied for. In addition, each pilot project is complemented by further individual measures. For example, the pilot projects in Italy worked on skills that are important for self-employment, while in Spain the focus was more on learning the correct behaviour in the world of work. Most of the young, unemployed participants have multiple barriers to employment, such as lack of language skills, low social inclusion or no school education. Many of the participants have a history of flight or migration.



2. The Educational Approach of Social Art

The approach of Social Art is an alternative education principle and is based on the conviction that the art of the future will be social and that an artistic approach is necessary to meet current social issues. Creativity, imagination and inspiration play central roles in overcoming obstacles, so that the artistic forms used in Social Art are not as important as using the concept. Good experiences were made with theatre, music, dance, literature and visual arts. Social Art strengthens social inclusion and social cohesion through artistic approaches and promotes the training of mental, emotional and physical skills. Therefore, Social Art is more holistic than previous educational concepts of state institutions, which are often very focused on cognition. Especially for people who have already tried other approaches without success or dropped out of state institutions, Social Art can be very effective. (For a deeper understanding of Social Art, especially regarding the theoretical roots, please see [2], [3]).

3. Methodology

Participants were interviewed before and after participation in the project using questionnaires to determine the effect participation in the project had on them. The questions were aimed at participants' self-assessment on the following topics: self-awareness, conflict and communication skills, managing emotions, team and organizational skills, management and business skills. In addition to the questionnaires, a project blog was continuously kept on the project's everyday life, with contributions written by trainers and participants. The trainers also wrote down the development of the participants from their perspective in a diary-like manner in a reflective process with the help of participative observation. In addition, short spotlight interviews were conducted with the trainers, in which they were asked about the project design under pandemic conditions on the one hand, and about the impact of the project on the participants on the other. The material evaluated for this article is recruited from the period of 7 months: October 2020-April 2021.

4. ArtE-Project during the Pandemic

4.1 Italy

While the pilot project in Germany faced comparatively low pandemic-related constraints in August/September 2020, constraints have been high during the two pilot projects in Florence and Prato, Italy, in the period from September to October ("Social Art per l'Inclusione") and October to December ("IMPULSO"). IMPULSO in particular was affected by constantly changing conditions due to the high number of infections in Italy at that time. Theatre training had to be moved to the digital world and back to the analogue world within the framework of distance education (FAD) several times, in order to comply with the contact restrictions in force at the time. Due to quarantines, health problems and waiting times for Covid tests, the group, consisting of 29 participants (mixed ages and mixed genders) and two theatre trainers, was seldom complete and roles had to be exchanged and sometimes reassigned.

4.2 Spain

In the pilot project in Barcelona, Spain, hygiene measures, such as wearing mouth and nose coverings, were also necessary of course, but there was no need to switch to distance learning because the group (14 participants) was much smaller. Nevertheless, it was often necessary to improvise spontaneously, as participants dropped out due to quarantine regulations and the rehearsal room was available later than planned due to the pandemic. The premiere could take place with an audience and live broadcast. Since the project was integrated into a Second Chance School, another five-week process could take place after the premiere, during which the participants were back at school and involved in job coaching in parallel. Throughout the job coaching, again theatre methods were used.

5. Findings

Both surveys using the questionnaires at the beginning of the pilot projects showed that the participants in both groups rated their skills at the beginning of the project as rather high.

In Italy, participation seems to have little impact on more general and long-term skills, such as emotion control and one's level of organization. At the end of the overall project 75% feel more confident, 50% feel more entrepreneurial and 75% feel they have improved their self-management skills. Also, specialized knowledge regarding the world of work improved over the course of the project. All participants attribute these positive changes in their lives to the project. In particular, 17.9% feel that it was the only factor in their change. However, there were also some problems. During the exclusively



digital project phases in Italy, there were difficulties in accessing the participants, and during the attendance phases and hybrid phases, there were problems with regard to the consistency of the learning processes, as a constant number of participants dropped out due to quarantines. According to the trainers, the problem of accessibility of participants is not pandemic-specific, but had existed before. It was merely exacerbated by the pandemic.

The survey after participation in the pilot project in Spain showed a significant increase in self-confidence, motivation and sense of belonging to the group. Skills relating to specialist knowledge of entrepreneurship were rated somewhat lower after participation, which is, according to the trainer, due to more realistic assessments. The participants' own communication skills were also still rated highly, but no longer consistently very highly. The participants' own ability to deal with conflict was rated significantly better. It was also determined that participation in the project had a positive influence on the participants' ability to control emotions and thoughts, on their creativity and on their linguistic abilities. Also, an increased ability to concentrate, the group feeling, the patience and support of the trainers, and access to artistic methods were positively emphasized.

The results of the surveys in Italy and Spain are comparable in that self-confidence and soft skills, including those for the world of work, improved for all participants. Even though the comparison of entrepreneurship skills by means of questionnaires objectively showed a deterioration in Spain, the trainers were nevertheless able to detect a positive transformation in the participants. In Italy, too, the results of the surveys coincide with the coaches' impressions. These noted that it is easy for participants to acquire specific expertise and learn things for the world of work, like how to create a pitch, while working on long-term-skills, like the ability to solve problems creatively and knowing their life-goals seem to be harder. The reason given by the trainers here was that the participants had to be honest with themselves for this and they often find this difficult.

6. Conclusion

The analyses of the trainers confirm this picture above: The participants in both pilot projects were able to gain broadly positive experiences, despite the pandemic-related restrictions.

The common feature in the implementation of both pilot projects under the given conditions was that constantly emerging problems were solved with the greatest possible creativity. It may be deduced from this that performative methods are in any case fundamentally geared to responding to the unexpected and empowering participants for creative problem-solving processes, so that they could therefore also function under pandemic conditions. It is also possible that overcoming resistance could be trained even better under the conditions and thus positively influenced the development of the participants.

However, the lesson learned for the Italian trainers was clearly this: The transformation only happens on stage. The stage makes all the difference. Trust it.

References

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