Give Youngsters a Voice

Tools and Methods in Participatory Art practices

The young resonate to music, they are interested in it. Music can make it easier to start a two-way communication and to process different topics. *Give Youngsters a Voice* is a series of community music events where the young participants create their own contents in the course of collective work.

BEGINNINGS

In order to make our initial motivation clear we first introduce ourselves. We are a team of a sociologist and an andragogist, both experienced in the activities of civil organisations and both musicians at the same time. In combining our twofold activities we got the first impulse from the program officer of Autonomia Foundation, which deals with Roma communities. The proposition was: what if we tried to activate the youth in a segregated Hungarian settlement where a community development program had just been launched for the locals. The village is called Szúcs, consisting of two parts: Szúcs Village Centre and 2.5 km further a separate settlement, where miners used to live. At present 168 persons live in the segregate of the village, the majority of them Roma. There is no place for communal activities other than the village community centre – no pub, no school, no shop. In this environment the young have considerably less chances than their mates living in areas with better infrastructure.

Situation, external circumstances

The example of Szúcs is not an exceptional case; there are a lot of settlements in the country in the same situation. Structural changes would be necessary to come over these disadvantages: in education, in settlement development policy and in the labour market, just to mention the most important issues. The circumstances prevailing in these areas significantly restrict the social mobility of the youth living in the small villages, the negative consequences of which strongly affect the young people we are working with. Unfortunately after the end of communist era the governments chose to avoid facing these problems instead of introducing long term, well-constructed reforms. In this situation the civil organisations react to the deficiencies of the governmental system, and they give help for the vulnerable communities defenceless in the unequal circumstances. *Give Youngsters a Voice* performs its activities with the help of civil organisations in the civil sector; its main profile is to reduce the disadvantages of the communities living in a segregated environment.

Coming back to our first community music group, we mainly wanted to help the children and the young to find their own voices. One must be aware of the fact that owing to their descent and social situation Roma children usually get less attention at school than their mates in majority, provided they can learn in an integrated class/school at all. This has a sad tradition in Hungary; for instance in the socialist system the Roma children usually used to sit in the back row behind the children in majority even if there were lines of empty desks further up between them. With refined methods this

practice was continued later on as well. Now in public education it is existing practice that Roma children are approached with resignation from the very outstart, which projects their future failures as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This atmosphere is demoralizing, it negatively influences the children's self-esteem and motivation, and in many cases they silently surrender to the situation. As one of them put it: "We are not the ones who speak". This is what we would like to change. We think active communication is the precondition for cooperation and community life as is self-esteem to progress. Activity, creativity, self-knowledge, communication and cooperation all drive into one direction, which is the autonomous person responsible for themselves and the community, actively asserting their own interests.

ABOUT THE SESSIONS

We call them community music sessions, but contrary to the name they are not about unleashing the musical talents of the participants. Irrespective of any previous experience of musical education anybody is most welcome to join our music sessions - anyone who would like to develop themselves in a group and to create something new. In our first community music group we still put more emphasis on the role of music, so for instance we tried to develop their rhythmic skills, but later we realized that we can spend our time together in a more interesting and useful way. The activities aiming at expressing one's own opinion and developing one's creativity got more and more into the focus. Music is still a central element of the sessions, but it is important to do exercises and activities which do not need any previous knowledge of music. Therefore music is a tool and not a goal in our methodology.

Although our experiences come from work with Roma youth, this method can be applied in any community irrespective of parentage or social status. The emphasis is laid on verbalism, self-expression, the development of individual and social skills, and on building community. If we had to describe the essence of our methods used in the sessions, first we would rather quote our goals we want to achieve to make it easier to understand the methodology applied for it.

OUR GOALS

Community development

We believe that ideally our individual interests are the same as those of the closer or wider community around us. However, we can formulate these interests only within a community, together with our partners. Nevertheless, in our world today's communities are rare even in places where we would expect that the similar living conditions and physical nearness would bring people together. Luckily, we can state that common goals and common activities can bring people together who would otherwise not link with each-other. Therefore building a community is always centred on and around doing common activities. Our number one goal is consequently to provide a platform for children, the young, where there is a chance to cooperate, so that the participants can get closer to each-other.

To show alternatives, i.e. the democratisation of art

Our target group, the teenagers are usually passive consumers of popular music representing primarily dance music and rap. By and large the Roma youth are aware of the origins of the music of Romani culture and they often listen to contemporary Romani music as well as to rap. Occasionally they sing together, mainly modern songs, or sometimes they improvise their own shorter lyrics. This is a very good basis for creating music where the lyrics are written by them and they can even participate in the creation of the musical tracks. It is important for them to see that it is not only the musicians they listen to who can make music, but they themselves are also able to create their own messages/contents and in this way they can also become heroes; persons who can express themselves in an authentic way about their actual and personal topics. The participants of the sessions individually write sentence pairs, parts of texts on a topic previously agreed upon, and then together we assemble the lyrics.

This method results in the fact that the quality of the texts created is somewhat uneven, however, it is democratic. Regarding the topicality and importance of the lyrics created they are not inferior to most of the songs they listen to.

Developing individual skills, boosting self-esteem

Just the fact that I am able to create a thing I have not been aware of so far – it is a splendid feeling. To be part of a creative process is a positive experience, and during systematic work the participants learn that creation is a complicated activity where individual efforts are just as important as cooperation with the group.

The text as the verbal form of self-expression plays an important role during the work. We would like to encourage the young to formulate their thoughts - this is naturally not so obvious for them, as usually nobody asks for their opinion. With creative text writing we develop their abstraction skills and we try to point out that writing can be fun, therapy, self-awareness; through writing one can rearrange their earlier experiences, thoughts and gain new ones.

Of course the sessions do not only involve work: games (team-building, communication, movement, drama games for tension-relief) are inserted to loosen up the style of the learning situation. The games activate the youngsters, develop their self-knowledge together with their insight into character and set their creativity free.

Development of citizenship awareness and activity

During our work we often experience that middle-aged people say they have never been asked about their opinion and when we ask them they just don't understand what we want.
They have never been involved in any decision making process. We would like to change this situation for the young people working with us, to develop these skills in them so that they could be able to make their own decisions and formulate their own opinion about the world. We are interested in developing persons who are able to fend for themselves and their own communities, to stand out for their own ideas and interests. Therefore this is actually a group working on democratic foundations, where the intervals for talking, the votings play an important role, and during the whole working process participation in decision making is very important. The democratic process is also substantial as the concepts of political field and the role of the individual and the community within this field are easier to understand. This experience may come in handy later in life.

During the working process we, as the group facilitators, treat the participants as equal partners. The common rules jointly established in our first session are equally relevant for everyone. On several occasions we have received feedback from the children stating that they enjoyed this informal, friendly atmosphere of partnership, which inspired them.

What we do not aim at

We would not like to enhance stereotypes concerning the Roma – e.g. they would all make first and foremost good musicians. Nothing supports this prejudice. We have held sessions in ten settlements so far and we can declare that the musical education of the Roma youth varies on a broad scale and is quite different.

METHODS

After describing how our sessions are embedded and what effects we would like to achieve, let us say some words about what a series of sessions look like, what kind of tools we use during our common process of creation.

Common rules

After getting familiar with the background, goals and possibilities of the sessions the young people get involved in our shared (hi)story by creating common rules. The rules collected by us are based on the principles of consensus decision making, by which a group can work towards a common goal quite efficiently. Usually it is quite easy for us to agree on these bottom-line criteria as in most of the cases the ideas of the young are also similar to this pattern. Listening to each-other's opinion and observing them, initiating situations for debates and democratic decisions are the most important cornerstones for our joint work.

Keeping contacts

Keeping in touch with the group is usually through the local contact person: he/she is the one who can arrange the practical things and facilities for holding the sessions and is in daily contact with the young participants. As we are speaking of young people, most of them can be contacted online, so we use the social networking sites to follow up, to communicate, to post materials and to ask questions from each-other. Beyond work it is also important to spend time together, therefore each time we also try to keep up personal relationships and if we have the funding we go out with the participants for excursions where we can be together in an environment different from the usual.

Regularity

We usually meet our groups every second week and so far our blocks of sessions have lasted approximately for 6-12 months. Occasionally we work intensively in blocks: for several consecutive days, usually at long weekends when the youth have more time. With our present group, after the first 6 months of 12 convenient blocks - the tangible, or rather audible result of which is a jointly produced song - we are now trying to launch another series of sessions, where we decide together what the core theme of the next project should be. Regularity is important in many ways, and as our sessions are extra-curricular activities, the week-end sessions are the most fruitful, when the participants are not tired of performing the weekday obligations.
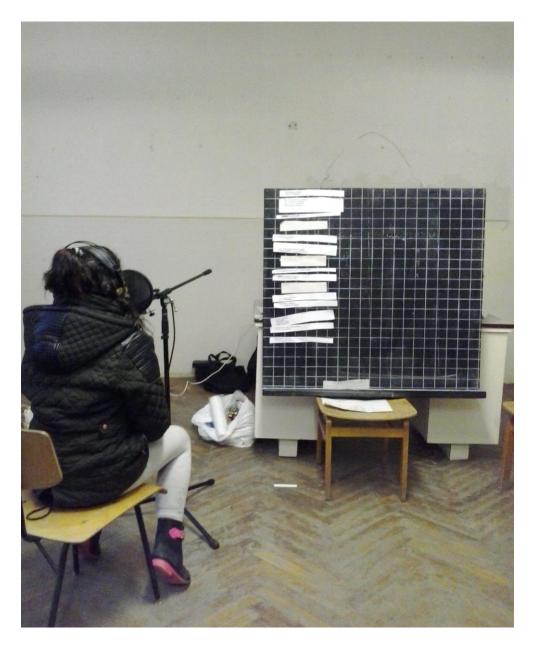
Diverse activities

After arriving at the venue of the session we first arrange the working environment with the participants, i.e. we put the chairs around the room so that communication could flow just like among partners. In case we need technical facilities (computer, sound system, microphones, and musical

instruments) these also have to be installed with the help of the participants. Usually we start with an informal conversation and then we proceed talking around a given topical issue.

Depending on the actual phase of realisation we do creative exercises inspired by drama pedagogy and music therapy based on cooperation, improvisation and partly concentration. The positive influencing of the participants' mood and the creation of a carefree community is a basic aim for these exercises, although they can also contribute to the development of individual concentration and cooperation. The experimental attitude is also a vital element of our sessions; however, we can only gradually achieve the level of openness which is required for this.

A key element of the program is verbal self-expression: from analysing the existing texts, through games of filling in the gaps in the text, to the exercises of writing lyrics we gradually arrive at the creation of their own contents or our common ones. The results of shared work are rhyming lines or even verses-libre (free poems), which evolve parallel with the music being composed to it.

It is important to note that the lyrics of the participants are applied in their original forms. The only influence of ours as group-leaders is confined to suggesting topics or making remarks on content or form, or the sequence of the created lines. In this way the lyrics will become the valid, authentic and honest messages of the participants.

As mentioned beforehand, previous experience of musical education is not a prerequisite for participation. The program is tailored to the set-up of the group, if we have children who play an instrument they take part in building up the music, if there aren't, we use our sound files and shape them with digital audio editing tools.

It is optional whether we want to perform the song created together; so far we have performed our composition with only one group: it was at a local event where the villagers could join our program as an audience. Other creative products related to our songs (e.g. video clips) provide additional opportunities for further creative work.

DIFFICULTIES

Age differences

Ideally our target group consisted of teenagers up to the age of 18, and it would be best to work with a homogenous group where the young participants are of similar age and interests. However, in the little villages where we work, this is nearly impossible, as locally there are not enough young people who could build a homogenous group which is ideal in terms of age. Therefore we mostly work with mixed groups with children and youth between 7-17 years of age. We have to accommodate ourselves to these circumstances and we also have to keep in mind the differences in the levels of knowledge and areas of interests.

The paradox of discipline

Our target group is used to the frontal teaching/learning situation at school; therefore the lack of it and the partnership have a liberating effect for them. This partly opens up the way for creativity, therefore we have to balance step-by-step between the positive methods of disciplining and the laissez-faire (=you can do as you like it) attitude. A further complication is added when we unpack the instruments, so we have to use a certain protocol in these cases. Fortunately, the majority of the participants sooner or later internalise the rules of joint work.

The basis for democratic functioning is to find the suitable local helper. In case this person is considered by the youth to be authentic this has an influence on the behaviour of the participants of the session. His presence helps to establish the suitable moral, which is a good starting point.

Letting them go

Our assignments cover a certain period so it is inevitable to finish the process and let the group go. Already at the start of a process we point out that we are going to share our time and participate in a systematic process of creation which has a closing date. However, letting them go is not easy, as during the sessions in many cases close and intimate relationships develop among us. Finishing a common product makes the closing down easier, and if new resources can be included some projects can even be continued. Beyond this we try to follow up the lives of the young people informally after finishing the project.

POSSIBLE LINES OF DEVELOPMENT

In the future we would like to open up new ways in several directions. Partly we would like to write down and publish our method so that other people can also have access to its know-how. On the other hand we would like to train new facilitators accordingly, ideally Roma youth from the local communities, or people living and working locally, who take over the method and could continue the sessions in the region without our presence. This method could ensure continuity in addition to experiencing the feeling of success only once.

Furthermore we envisage involving professional helpers in our sessions: a developmental teacher and psychologist who could occasionally provide personalised pedagogic advice for the leaders of the sessions about the directions of development for the participants. We would also like to exchange information or to work together with similar initiatives, we could even evolve a joint methodology that could go beyond the results achieved so far.

Reference songs:

[Bad children's good friendship](#)

[My smile, it hurts sometimes](#)

[The village, where i live (acoustic version)](#)