



Volkshochschule
Aalen

CASE STUDY:

Bring Dich Ein – Your Voice Matters *Symbolic Elections for the Federal Parliament*

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X-European.

Negotiating Identities in the Third Space (X-ENITS)



Erasmus+

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Introducing X-ENITS

In 2020, vhs Aalen initiated an Erasmus + Strategic Partnership in Education. We joined forces with Border Crossings, an Irish theatre company; with Siilinjärvi community college in Finland; and with the Migration and Development Centre at the University of Cukurova in Turkey. In the face of rising populism across Europe in the preceding years and concepts of identities that were based on othering migrants and those with migrant roots, our project aimed to strengthen practices within cultural and education sectors that promote social inclusion and intercultural dialogue.

In particular, our group was interested in the concept of Third Space (see below for an overview). We wanted to explore the potential and usefulness of the Third Space format for the purposes of social inclusion and intercultural dialogue, while acknowledging the impact of each partner's particular social and political context.

To this end, we held three training sessions in Aalen, Finland and Ireland, with the team from the Migration and Development Centre providing theoretical input and evaluation. Each of the non-academic partners also developed an activity which sought to apply the principles of Third Space within their specific organisational purpose.

This case study presents the activity undertaken at the vhs Aalen.

2. A Short Introduction to Third Space

On a physical level, Third Space is understood as a space arranged and furnished so as to invite diverse groups to use as they see fit. This understanding of Third Space may be traced back to American sociologist Ray Oldenburg, who named the home the *first place* and one's work environment the *second place*¹. Beside these two *places*, Oldenburg referred to another, *third place* which he described as 'informal public gathering places'² that were '*inclusive and local*'³. The primary function of a third place for Oldenburg was to unite the neighbourhood⁴.

In Germany, libraries in particular have adopted the concept of Third Place ('Dritter Ort') with reference to Ray Oldenburg⁵. The Kompetenznetzwerk für Bibliotheken (Competency Network for Libraries) identify the following characteristics of the Third Space⁶:

¹ See Oldenburg, R., 1989 (1999). *The Great Good Place. Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. New York: Hachette Books.

² Ibid, p. xvii.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Kompetenznetzwerk für Bibliotheken, 2020. *Was ist der Dritte Ort?*

<https://bibliotheksportal.de/informationen/die-bibliothek-als-dritter-ort/dritter-ort/?cn-reloaded=1>, accessed 22.12.2022.

⁶ Ibid.

- **Neutrality**, defined as no-one having responsibilities toward the other person
- **Inclusivity**, which is characterised by a lack of specific access requirements
- **Availability and accessibility**, e.g. through long opening hours and a central location
- **Exchange and conversation**, promoting contact between citizens, thus strengthening social cohesion and democracy
- An **open, positive and informal atmosphere**, so that it feels like a second home to visitors
- **Continuous development**

On a more practical level, Third Space is understood as a *practice* which actively creates and enables equal and full participation by diverse groups, especially those facing systemic risks of discrimination⁷. Tracing its roots back to post-colonial studies, this concept of Third Space acknowledges the existence of (historic) power imbalances that continue to undermine equality and thus social inclusion. In consequence, Third Space as a practice seeks to proactively facilitate an environment that allows power imbalances to be addressed and equalised. From this process also stems the ultimate aim of creating joint futures that transcend the (colonial) past.

Within X-ENITS, we agreed that while the appropriate physical composition of a space was necessary to ensure ease of access and usability for a group's particular needs, the facilitated aspects of Third Space as a practice were even more central. In consequence, and through discussions during trainings and project team meetings, the team from the Migration and Development Centre developed a set of questions that help approach a definition of a Third Space, while crucially taking account also of the differences in context which invariably change what makes a space or activity a *third* space. These questions are:

Distance/proximity

- a. What kind of a space to be used? (Ambulant, hall, open-air etc.) You can provide pictures.
- b. Can you define the space as a social space? How so? (Public, common, nature etc.)
- c. Can we say "the space is neutral" or can we talk about the neutrality of the network?
- d. Is it open to anybody, easy to get, inclusive etc.?
- e. What are the physical components of the space? (Size, flexibility, accessibility, mobility etc.)

Participation

- a. Who is included? And who is not?
- b. Please provide the demographic information of the participants including conveyors and yourself.
- c. Can you reflect on power structures? Are they diminished? (Facilitation instead of regulation etc.)
- d. What is the level of involvement of participants? (Such as corporal performance, mobility etc.)
Did every participant attend to all components of the activity?
- e. Please describe the decision-making process on the space.

⁷ See especially Bhabha, H., 1994 (2004). *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge

Interactions

- a. What are the activities?
- b. Do activities include all participants? How so?
- c. Can we talk about a multimediatized environment? (Physical space blended with digital media; activity includes music and corporal performance etc.)
- d. Please explain whether the activity make way for community-building? (e.g., demand for democracy in Aalen; historical bonds; expectations etc.)

Reflexivity

- a. Is there a defined feedback activity? (Scales, diaries, mind-mapping etc.)
- b. Are the activity outcomes defined at the beginning?
- c. What are the activity outcomes?
- d. How do you evaluate the impact of the activity? It doesn't necessarily have to be a quantitative measurement, but rather qualitative review how participants and yourself experience the activity.

This case study uses these questions to discuss our activity.

3. Our Context

As a Volkshochschule, our purpose is to offer education. We are regulated by the Weiterbildungsgesetz Baden-Württemberg (Act for Further Education within the State of Baden-Württemberg). While we cover a large percentage of our expenditure through course fees, we also receive a considerable amount of public funding without which the organisation could not survive. For this reason, we are also tied into the funding parameters of the State of Baden-Württemberg, which distinguish between Unterrichtseinheiten (teaching units) that can be funded, and those which cannot. This is also subject to a minimum number of participants. For all courses, their educational content must be clearly demonstrable. This can pose a challenge particularly for activities that are aimed primarily at social inclusion.

We offer further education primarily for adults, although there is a limited offer for young people also, particularly in the areas of art education and additional coaching in core school subjects. Within our offer for adults, we cover all areas from professional development, computer skills, sustainability, health and sports, cooking, languages, and personal development. A considerable number of courses are certified.

4. An introduction to Bring Dich Ein – Your Voice Matters

In 2021, vhs Aalen was one of six Volkshochschulen in Baden-Württemberg that had applied and were subsequently chosen to participate in a project promoting political engagement by those without the right to vote. The key aim of the project was to inform about ways in which people could participate in German democracy despite lacking voting rights.

The project was funded by the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (Federal Ministry of Migration and Refugees) and the Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg (State Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports Baden-Württemberg). Each participating Volkshochschule was asked to plan and deliver ten activities. We chose one of these activities as our activity and case study for X-ENITS.

II. THE CASE STUDY: SYMBOLIC ELECTIONS FOR THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENT

1. Description of activity

On 26th September 2021, the day of the German parliamentary elections, we organised a symbolic election for people without voting rights, as well as a poll for all those with voting rights on whether voting rights should be extended on a communal level. Anyone living in Aalen and over the age of 18 could participate in person.

A 'voting tent' was erected on Aalen's central market place next to the main fountain. This area is pedestrianized. Although it was a Sunday, the area was busy due to the large number of cafés, restaurants and ice cream shops surrounding the market place and adjacent streets.

The tent was framed with vhs Aalen beach flags as well as posters for the symbolic elections in multiple languages. These had also been used alongside flyers in the weeks prior to the event and handed out to community groups, particularly those with migrant roots. Signs regulating access to the tent due to COVID restrictions at the time were also posted at the entrance. On the outside of the tent, information about the German electoral system as well as voting rights for foreigners in other EU countries and beyond was displayed.

The ballot box, clearly marked with the logo for the symbolic elections, was placed on a table outside of the tent. Ballots identical to the official ballots, but bearing the logo for the symbolic elections, were also placed on this table, as well as tables inside the tent.

On a second table outside the tent were ballot papers to vote Yes or No to extending voting rights to non-citizens on the communal level. Another ballot box for this poll was on this table as well.

The voting was open from 10am to 5pm. A group of volunteers, individuals as well as representatives from community groups, actively invited passers-by to participate. They would generally approach people with a neutral question, 'Have you already voted?' Depending on their answer, revealing that they either did or did not have the right to vote, they were then invited to participate either in the symbolic election or in the poll on extending voting rights.

At the end of the day, both the election ballot papers as well as the poll submissions were counted and a press release was issued. Some months later, the ballot papers were also handed to the elected members of parliament for Aalen in a press conference.

2. Organising the activity: Power-sharing and setting goals

The idea for organising symbolic elections during the parliamentary elections came from a member of vhs Aalen's advisory board. The idea had been circulated amongst the migrant communities previously, but had not been realised. We therefore saw our role as enabler. Our managing director,

Dr. Nicole Deufel, subsequently took the idea to the city's Integrations Ausschuss (Committee on Integration) and invited members to become part of an organising project team. In the end, the project team consisted of eight individuals mostly from the Integrations Ausschuss, as well as our managing director.

We were in charge of arranging and facilitating the meetings of the project team. Within the meeting, we presented the tasks that needed to be undertaken according to information that we had received from Freiburg, where symbolic elections have taken place since 2002. Both our managing director and the member of the advisory board who had originally suggested the activity had attended the meeting with the representative from Freiburg. Therefore, from the beginning, this member of the advisory board played an almost equal role in facilitating the group meetings.

Members of the project team discussed all tasks and decided how to proceed. Most organisational tasks such as obtaining permission to erect the tent or print posters were delegated to us. Other tasks, such as providing translations in multiple languages for the poster, were undertaken by individual project team members and their respective group.

However, while we as a constitutional member of the project team provided most of the practical support, most of the actual decisions were made within the project team as a whole. As such, this structure proved key in sharing power over the event and enabling participation by people outside of the vhs. The project team also set the goals for the activity, which were as follows:

- To make those without voting rights aware of how the system works
- To give those without voting rights a voice
- To raise awareness of the fact that over 8,000 people within our city are excluded from voting
- To reach at least 500 people with the symbolic election.

Despite this co-creative nature of the project team, we did feel that a slight power imbalance remained in our favour. This seemed to arise from the fact that there was an unspoken understanding that if we withdrew our support, the project, i.e. the symbolic elections, would not be realised. No actual conflict arose, but it is not impossible that partners more readily deferred to our views than they would have others', simply because of the possibility that we would drop out of the project. This is a dilemma that we did not feel we could entirely solve even through encouraging an open discussion. The reality of red lines does exist for an institutional partner like ourselves. We feel that in this situation, it is important to be completely transparent on this aspect from the beginning to enable an open negotiation of where the partners can meet to move forward together.

3. The Space: Distance/Proximity

The market place in Aalen by the main fountain, or Marktbrunnen, is one of the most recognisable spaces in the city. When the project team discussed where the tent should be situated, the market place came second after the town hall (which, as an official voting station, was not a real option). The entire group felt that in placing the tent in the market place, we were making both a statement about the importance of the issue as well as making the tent as accessible as possible by placing it where most people who come to the city centre pass by. It was also felt that because the surrounding area is enlivened by the many cafes, restaurants and ice cream shops, the voting tent would feel part of everyday life and not owned by any one entity or group.

As such, the decision for this location was made quite deliberately by the project team. It was viewed as being accessible and open to all, without any structural barriers, visible or non-visible.

On the day itself, the reasoning of the project team proved correct insofar as observation confirmed that most participants had not specifically come for the symbolic election but stumbled across it and felt comfortable to be approached or approach the tent directly. The fact that one did not need to enter the tent to find out about the activity or indeed to participate in it also proved to make participation easier. Most people filled in their ballot forms at one of the tables instead of seeking the tent's privacy.

For us as an educational organisation, it was also particularly exciting to leave our own premises and bring an activity directly to where people are, especially those who might not normally seek us out. It was also good not to be within a classic educational setting such as a closed classroom, but instead offer learning outside right in the centre of our community.

4. Engaging People: Participation and Interaction

Due to its nature as an election, our activity itself was highly structured with no opportunity for participants themselves to change what they were able to do, i.e. vote using the mock-up of the official ballot and a polling card, respectively.

However, with regards to the learning goals set for the activity, this procedure proved perfect, as it enabled those who had never been allowed to vote in Germany before to experience themselves how the process works. Our volunteers stood by to answer questions and provide explanations. In many instances, there also ensued conversations about the parties and individuals on the ballot paper. One woman's comment is illustrative of the effect this had: she explained that she had never before bothered to engage with German politics because she had never felt a part of it.

The poll on extending voting rights had a similar effect. While the activity itself allowed little flexibility, people began conversations both with our volunteers as well as with each other. One instance was particularly remarkable, when two friends apparently for the first time started to talk about the fact that one of them was not allowed to vote. The other had never given much thought to extending voting rights. In this regard, too, the activity, though highly structured and predetermined by the project team, achieved the goal of raising awareness, and facilitating conversations about the issue.

5. Engaging People: Facilitation

It quickly became clear on the day of the symbolic election that our team of volunteers was essential in inviting people in, making them feel at ease and being partners for conversation about the electoral system and voting rights.

We also felt that it was particularly helpful that our volunteers came from the networks of project team members, including their family members and children. Especially considering those without voting rights whom the activity tried to reach, the fact that many of our volunteers themselves were from migrant backgrounds (with or without German citizenship) meant that they could recognise themselves in those facilitating the activity. At the same time, having volunteers from mainstream

German society meant that people asked to consider the extension of voting rights also felt invited as part of a community and without any pressure to decide in a certain way, as may otherwise have been the case.

The conversations that took place around the activity itself proved an important aspect of the activity, and one which the participants shaped themselves according to their own contexts and wishes. Conversations ranged from the political system of Germany, parties and political representation, to ways in which people can shape our community without having the right to vote. It was in these conversations that much of the learning and social cohesion happened.

For us as an educational organisation it was particularly interesting to pursue a more open approach to teaching through conversation, to be an enabler and facilitator rather than a teacher at the front of a class. Volunteers reported that this could at times be demanding because they had to sometimes use prompts, ask questions or respond spontaneously to comments and questions. Overall, however, it was felt that this level of flexibility was a perfect addition to the more structured and embodied activity of the election and poll themselves, and made the learning more intimate and relevant to each person's circumstances.

6. Conclusion

Responding to a suggestion from within the community and working as a facilitator alongside members of that community to make an activity happen was a great way for us as an organisation to engage in participatory planning and co-creative delivery of learning. It enabled us to respond to a need within the community, and develop further as facilitators of learning rather than teachers.

It was very helpful to have established clear goals for the activity in order to assess its success. Overall, we did achieve our goals, with the exception of actual numbers. Instead of 500 people, we were only able to engage 275.

Setting these goals also ensured that all aspects of the activity were carefully planned accordingly. This planning, although perhaps counter-intuitive to the desired openness and flexibility of a Third Space, to us proved essential for giving structure not just for ourselves, but also for participants who appeared to require some formal input before they felt comfortable to engage more freely according to their own interests. We believe that some such structure will be required for the foreseeable future, but that, depending on the (educational) goals in question, the structure itself can be jointly changed if the needs of the group require it.