

Making a Difference Now: Educating for Democracy and Participation

Brazil

International House New York

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Project goals

The goal of the project was to test the efficacy of a civic education program in increasing high school students' civic and political participation and to understand the best operational model for future expansion. My long-term goal is to foster high-quality, democratic civic education in Brazil and build active citizens who lead the transformation of their own realities.

Other Fund Sources

- AC⁴ | The Earth Institute | Columbia University- US\$ 3,000.00
- Institute of Latin American Studies | Columbia University - US\$ 1,567.00
- In kind contribution from Lojas Gang, youth retail store - Approximately US\$ 250.00

Project details

The project I conducted over the summer was conceived as the pilot project of Praxis, a civic education social enterprise that I am starting in Brazil.

Civic engagement is one of the essential building blocks of a healthy democracy that promotes its people's peace and well being. As demonstrated by initiatives in many developed countries, in order to build that engagement, civic education is key. In Brazil, democratic civic education has been absent from school curricula for at least 50 years. The youth grows up without understanding the basic institutions of our democracy, without the skills to lead and participate and, finally, without the recognition of their own importance and capacity in the process of social change.

Praxis' proposal is to equip the youth with the knowledge, the skills and the positive attitude they need to transform issues related to politics, state and government functioning, and the Brazilian democracy. My Projects for Peace served as Praxis' pilot program.

The work took place in Colégio Estadual Florinda Tubino Sampaio, a public state school in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil. The school enrolls about 950 students (in total) that come mainly from middle to low-income families. The entire morning high school freshman, consisting of 104 students divided into five classes, were enrolled in the project. Meanwhile, the afternoon students¹ were designated as our control group for research and impact measurement purposes.

The fieldwork lasted nine weeks (May 25th - July 17th): the first two consisted of preparation and set up and the other seven being in direct contact with the students. The program took place within three scheduled 50-minute sessions per week and also extra-class activities.

The main methods we used to develop students' knowledge on civic issues were in-class brainstorm activities, lectures and discussions on topics related to political theory, political science and its concrete applications in Brazilian democracy. To address their skill development, students were involved in a class project where they put in practice the concepts learned. They collectively defined their class constitution; brainstormed and debated their communities' problems; voted for a challenge and solution proposal; researched; developed a plan of action; and manufactured a presentation and a portfolio about their work. In order to inspire the students to act, successful and recognized social entrepreneurs of the city were brought to share their perspectives in weekly luncheons. The students were also offered a documentary workshop in order to learn how register their work, and the films will be shown to the school community in October 2015.

At the end of the program, the students presented their class-selected challenge and plan of action to an external evaluation panel, composed of the aforementioned guest speakers. The students' projects focused on animal protection (class 101), school revitalization (class 102), waste management (class 103), anti-discrimination campaign in the school (class 104) and school infrastructure fixing (class 105). This activity allowed the students to get first hand feedback and suggestions from experienced social entrepreneurs and to practice their presentation skills to external audiences.

¹ In Brazil, schools usually operate in three shifts (morning, afternoon and night).

Finally, at the closing event, both the program and the students' projects were presented to the school community, involving parents, teachers, school staff, and friends. Prizes to the students evaluated as the most cooperative in each class by their own peers were awarded as well as a class prize to the group with the best plan of action according to the external panel evaluation.

In parallel to the students program itself, we conducted a series of assessment and research activities to help us better understand our impact and plan for future expansion. We applied a pre and a post-test questionnaire to both the intervention and the control group; conducted 3 types of satisfaction surveys with the students; and continuously interviewed the 3 directly involved teachers.

Considering students had access to very few civic activities in their school and the great number of international research showing the impact that a program like this can have, we believe that in the long-term the ones who went through the program will present a much higher civic engagement in society than the ones that didn't. We now have a significant amount of data to analyze regarding their behavior and more measurements are scheduled for October and December of this year, which will hopefully prove our hypothesis that civic education works.

In addition to the direct impact on the students, the project had a great impact on the development of Praxis: it allowed me to grasp much better the reality of public schools in Brazil; the teachers perspectives, frustrations and aspirations; to understand students' pace of learning and to identify the on the ground challenges to the development of the social enterprise.

Fortunately, the future outlook for Praxis seems extremely positive. First and foremost, there is a recognized need in the Brazilian society for increased civic educational activities in schools. We had an extremely positive reception in the school community, and constantly received feedback from individuals who supported the idea and emphasize its benefits and the difference it made.

Second, we were able to guarantee well-planted seeds for Praxis. We solidified a strong network of funders, supporters, volunteers, and experts who are willing to contribute to Praxis' future and want to see it grow. This network also already includes three potential staff members who declared their interest to be involved in future developments.

Third, by the request of the school teachers, the program was extended this year, and my intervention became only the first phase of a program that will be worked on with the students until December. Furthermore, the teachers and school staff wish to continue it next year and other schools have already showed interest. We were also contacted by school alumni, students from other grades, and parents who showed appreciation for the initiative and wanted to be involved.

Finally, I believe I solidified my managerial and leadership ability to run Praxis. I feel today comfortable in fundraising, coordinating stakeholders, establishing the general strategy and guiding the development of the program's content. Even more, I fell ready to take on the challenges that will come.

Contributing to Peace

I define peace as as the ability of a community or society to manage its conflicts without resorting to violence. I also understand that the ability of this same community or society to promote its people's basic well-being (access to housing, food, health, etc.) is also a huge part of maintaining the conditions that allow peace to take place. My project contributes to peace by capacitating individuals to deal with the conflicts and civic demands that naturally arise in a democracy. By understanding their institutional environment, having the skills to navigate and lead, and being inspired to create positive change, I believe I am helping to build citizens who refrain from violence and are able to build concrete solutions. In the short-term, the students that go through Praxis program are dealing with problems that directly affect their communities on a daily basis. On the long-term, these students will certainly grow into citizens that are better capacitated to engage in even bigger challenges that affect society as a whole.

I realized that putting a project together and having a positive impact was easier than I thought. Some of the things I believed would be the hardest, like is finding support and finance, were actually much easier given a well-thought and well-intended initiative. I was amazed by the amount of people and institutions that decided to support me, and by how big the project became. It made me feel less afraid to take risks and to go ahead with the initiative, even in the face of challenges.

"The main reason why this project was valuable is that it allowed me to test a big idea in a small scale and gain a better understanding of what I need to do in order to take it ahead; more than that, it gave me legitimacy to take it ahead. I learned that creating an impact is much simpler and easier and that people are more willing to help than I expected when they recognize our good intentions and good work." Diana Engel Gerbase

