

Personal Stories

Nowadays, the expression “persons at risk of social exclusion,” and the opposite phrases such as “social inclusion” or “social integration,” seem to appear more often in the public debate.

Art can be helpful in reducing social exclusion

The phrase “social exclusion” refers to situations we describe as people at risk of isolation, often described as underclass and without necessary means for living; or people without individual abilities, which then makes them feel unequal to others in a given community. These kinds of personal situations prevent them from reaping the benefits of living in a society in which they belong to. According to research, the risk of exclusion increases amongst people long-term unemployed, lonely parents, impoverished, addicted, disabled, ethnic minorities, and those in difficult life situations.

Without a formal aid-system support, integration is often impossible or strongly hindered. There are numerous organizations in Bielsko-Biala offering help for people at risk of social exclusion. One of them, “The Grodzki Theatre,” offers support activities through engagement of artistic initiatives. However, effectiveness of such help is linked to highly trained people, who have constant opportunities for broadening their knowledge and experience. Taking into consideration this overall picture, “The Grodzki Theatre” created an international platform: *artescommunity.eu*. This web source is a discussion panel for European trainers working in various projects and aimed at promoting social integration and education through art. The platform allows them to disseminate their work and gives trainers an opportunity to share new ideas favoring social inclusion. The platform is part of a project entitled “ARTES” – Art as a Vehicle for Education and Social Inclusion, and co-financed by The European Commission since 2013. As a part of this project, “The Grodzki Theatre” organized an international conference in Florence on November 14-15, 2014. Conference aims were to get to know the people who created the “Artes Internet Community,” and to specify information which is posted online. Conference participants also took part in workshops familiarizing them with the working styles of trainers from various European organizations.

Storytelling

Diverse subjects of the conference and workshops included experiences in working with the various groups endangered by social exclusion: ethnic and national minority groups (Roma people living in Slovakia or immigrants in France); and multi-religious communities or pupils experiencing learning problems. Regardless of the diversity, the workshop methodologies were linked by a simple motive, indicating their versatility: personal stories.

This significant workshop methodology illustrated that “storytelling can be used as a narrative to break social isolation.” When telling stories, participants enter areas in which they are able to find common denominators that connect them with other people: personal stories, fairy tales told by parents to a child, or a narrative relating to an important event for a given community, or likewise a biblical story. Telling a personal story helps connect people, because it forces individuals to reflect on situations that others may have similarly experienced. Likewise, telling fairy tales or biblical stories awakens values that we might be unaware of, especially in coping with stress linked to difficult life situations. The listening experience can be a turning point when a person realizes he or she is not the only one suffering personal difficulties. And with this appreciation that a person is not alone, there may well be a strengthening of character and renewed motivation for the individual to find solutions regarding personal problems.

People at risk are discovered to be more equal when telling stories...

Storytelling is a method that supports people to feel equal in their own country, or in a new homeland, or in Europe, while simultaneously preserving their individual identity. The integration of Europe opens new opportunities for development, but also imposes some requirements. The basis of integration in a given community is to get to know their language. If we want to travel and move freely within Europe good English language skills are necessary. Similarly, integration within local communities requires us to know and use their language freely, to have communication skills and to show our needs. In storytelling workshops, participants develop necessary abilities to better express themselves verbally and nonverbally. This includes: vocabulary, imagination, interactions aimed at seeking relations with others, nonverbal communication and mindfulness.

The storytelling workshops facilitate breaking communication barriers in native and foreign languages, and helps diminish the differences between people. But what is most important, the program does not erase cultural or ethnic identity. Workshop participation provides an opportunity to simultaneously fulfill the need of being ourselves and being included, as stories regarding personal motives similar to our own often emerge. Concentrated attention on these stories encourages acceptance of another human being, who might otherwise be perceived through stereotype generalizations associated with other cultures, immigrants or elderly. Thus storytelling consolidates our own identity, and likewise protects groups at risk of discrimination from hiding their identity.

Music, theatre, film: the story of a person

Furthermore, stories convey emotions that emerge simultaneously between the speaker and the listener, for instance while listening to a “musical story.” When participants share experiences evoked by a musical piece, various emotional feelings emerge that are common to all people: fear, happiness, sadness etc. Thus listening to music can lead to the realization that diverse groups of people have similar emotional experiences; and this shared, common experience can start the process of overcoming stereotypes that affect the social exclusion of endangered groups. This kind of emotional event can reinforce the appreciation of individual identities, as we realize the many experiences diverse people share. Collectively, music, theatre, film or enacted biblical stories are strong emotional mediums that tend to unite diverse groups. People, who engage in staging a biblical story, now get a chance to confront a historical narrative with their own individual stories. This exercise can get someone to better understand others likewise engaged in staging stories. The benefit here is that the universal content of a historical story is actually transformed into a subjective experience, and proclaims that “the truth about me is also the truth about other human beings.”

The conference in the capital of Tuscany was an interesting meeting of creative people, who are passionate about working with local communities. None of the presented work methodologies could be regarded as better or worse, or more interesting or boring. Their effectiveness in including people at risk in the community was equally strong, as they collectively drew-upon the same source: a personal story.

The conference “ARTES” – Art as a Vehicle for Education and Social Inclusion, held in Florence on November 14-15, 2014 was coordinated by the the Bielsko Artistic Association Grodzki Theatre. The project finishes in November 2015. Widely available public materials continue to be published on our web portal: artescommunity.eu. They can be utilized as e-learning.

This summary report was provided by **Maria Egielman**, artist, philologist, and psychologist, who is the project coordinator for the Bielsko Artistic Association Grodzki Theatre.