Ewa Stoecker
Expedition Inside Culture Association, Kraków

Irmina Wachna
Jagiellonian University Extension, Kraków

ORANGE FOR EARTH — AN EDUCATIONAL PROJECT WHICH (TEMPORARILY?) CHANGED 100 POLISH SCHOOLS

Abstract

Orange for Earth – educational project which (temporarily?) changed 100 Polish schools
The text presents an educational project which was implemented on 100 Polish public schools
in year 2006–2007. The project was put into practice by NGO "Expedition Inside Culture" and
aimed on introducing the method of project as a regular teaching tool. Theoretical background
and organizational philosophy of the association are presented to help to understand where the
need for such project came from. Next the description of the project, including is steps and
aims, is given. As summarize results of undertaken evaluation are shown and commented. The
text ends with questions which raised in mind of people who were involved in the project, in
order to by better prepared for future similar actions.

Abstrakt

Orange dla Ziemi – projekt edukacyjny, który (chwilowo?) zmienił 100 polskich szkół
Tekst prezentuje projekt edukacyjny, który wdrożony został w 100 polskich szkołach publicz-
nych w roku szkolnym 2006–2007. Projekt realizowany był przez Stowarzyszenie „Ekspedycja
w Głąb Kultury" i miał na celu przedstawienie metody projektu jako narzędzia nauczania.
Prezentacja podstaw teoretycznych i filozofii organizacji ma na celu zrozumienie, skąd się
wzięła potrzeba przygotowania takiego projektu. Następnie zaprezentowany jest przebieg pro-
jektu, wraz z jego etapami i celami. Jako podsumowanie przytoczone są wyniki przeprowa-
dzonej ewaluacji. Tekst kończą pytania, jakie pojawiły się w głowach osób zaangażowanych
w realizację projektu po to, by w przyszłości lepiej przygotować się do podobnych działań.

Introduction

Implemented in 100 Polish schools, the project *Orange for Earth* shows an example of cooperation in the field of education between the public and non-governmental (NGO) sector, namely association Expedition Inside Culture (EIC) and the Foundation of the TP Group. Some people may ask if it is reasonable to bring together those two worlds, which may look very different at first sight. Some others may question the need for such initiatives. That is understandable because in Poland, in common understanding the school's environment is still very narrowly defined and very often closed to the outer world.

In this context people involved in EIC for 7 years have been organizing international youth projects which were based on non-formal education. During those projects we talked a lot with young people about their schools: how do they find them, what they expect from them and what would they change in schools if they could. Based on those shared stories from various countries (as our international projects include people from countries like: Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and USA) we have drawn one main conclusion – that school is very often detached from today's world. It has problems with catching up with a contemporary, very quickly changing, reality. What impact does such a situation have on young people? They feel that the time they spend at school could be used more effectively if more importance would be put on things that are not connected with so called "textbook knowledge," because this kind of knowledge is not sufficient these days. These talks showed us that nowadays students expectations towards schools are much higher.

One of the most often mentioned assumptions is that school prepares the student for labor market. What does it mean in practice? It means that pupils should not be prepared to accept all conditions they encounter but be ready to create those circumstances – because such people are "most wanted" on the labor market. It means school should teach how to be active, responsible and ready to negotiate.

Another factor is the ability to use modern technologies, which seems to be a necessary condition for taking part in public life. Here by "using" we do not understand only the technical skill, but also mental readiness to take part in virtual communication processes and the capacity to use this ability in a process of self-development. So preparation for effective use of modern technologies is also considered a duty of contemporary school.

The next feature is connected with globalization, which makes our world more varied than it used to be in the past. Nowadays the ability to work in diverse, multicultural groups is crucial for successful existence. Features such as: openness, readiness for cooperation, ability to understand different value systems, as well as awareness of our own priorities, autonomy and a willingness to take responsibility for yourself and others – these are the priorities of modern education.[1]

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[1] G. Mazurkiewicz, *Bezradność szkoły. Jakich szkół potrzebuje społeczeństwo wiedzy?*, in: Materiały konferencyjne III Konferencji Naukowej "Wiedza i Innowacje", *Wiedza w rozwoju gospodarki*, 2007.

The Orange for Earth Project

Equipped with the above mentioned knowledge and beliefs the association "Expedition Inside Culture" (EIC), which bands together students, teachers, psychologists, sociologists, and those interested in pedagogy, in other words, people in various ways involved in education, prepared the project *Orange for Earth*. The proposal was funded by the Foundation of the TP Group and the project was implemented in the school year 2006/2007.

The project started together with another, well known in Poland, an NGO action called "Cleaning the World" organized by the Foundation "Our Earth." In this initiative groups of students gather together and literally clean their surroundings: forests, streets, fields etc. It happens regularly once a year. In the EIC project we invited students to document this action by making 3 photos and submiting them on the project webpage together with a short cleaning report. The second task was to then take part in the on-line forum discussions, which were related to current action issues. 475 schools participated in the first stage, and 100 of the most active schools were invited to the next one.

The main task for schools in the second stage of the project was to conduct 4 projects in different topic areas, methods and range. Moreover, schools were encouraged to use two of four kinds of project (research, media, educational, social). Projects could refer to four topic areas (history and society, culture and art, multicultural and ecology). They had 6 weeks for conducting a project, and after each of them the students' task was to provide a report that was later published on the website. Teachers and students were not left alone with this assignment: we grouped schools regionally in groups of ten and each group had a moderator who was guiding the process and helping if it was needed.

In the project we focused on issues which we consider as essential features of a good, modern school:

- Developing students' awareness of responsibility for surroundings and the world – we took the wide concept of "responsibility" which includes being responsible not only for yourself and your actions, eg. how do you learn, but also being responsible for other people, your friends, neighbors, fellow citizens. This also included the environment in which they live.
- Creating and strengthening students' public spirit, especially the beliefs connected with environmentally friendly behaviors – we included care for the environment as a regular duty of engaged citizens.
- Creating and developing the ability of honest public activity – modern teaching methods, like project-based learning methods, enable those involved to connect the process of teaching with the local environment and its events. In such conditions students are able to take part in real life activities.
- Acquiring basic skills essential for living in contemporary and a dynamic developing world – those skills were already mentioned at the beginning of this paper. What was important here, was to say that these are teachers, parents and students together who decide which skills should be taught.

At the end of this stage students prepared their individual reflections about the process they went through, which was called "Me and the world." Presentations were prepared at first individually by each student and finally they were gathered in the schools' Power Point presentation. To close this part of the project we invited representatives of the schools to Warsaw to take part in a public debate. They got to practice public speech and shared experience they gained during the project while discussing environmental and civic issues.

In the third stage of *Orange for Earth* 25 schools took part in a scientific students' expedition that was held in Suwalszczyzna. Students explored the region using the method of "expeditionary learning". The method is based on the assumption, that students cooperate in independent and responsible ways while conducting a specific project. All actions are prepared by students and coordinated by a teacher who guides students to achieve their goal, which is to explore the chosen issue or region, present information they gained and reflect on the learning process. The method creates an environment for authentic and democratic dialogue between students and teacher, and helps them to become open and honest partners in the learning process.

In our case, the project was to prepare and an conduct educational expedition and research on one particular aspect, solving a problem or answering a question. 25 school groups were qualified for the third stage of the *Orange for Earth* and went for the Expedition. Each group on the expedition was represented by 4 students and 1 teacher (in total 125 people).

We divided our work into four main steps:

- Preparation for Expedition
  Before arrival, schools were divided into four groups – students chose a topic area they would be working on during the Expedition. Those were the same topic areas as we had proposed for projects in the second stage in the program (history and society, culture and art, multicultural and ecology). Moreover, all students had the possibility to introduce themselves on the project's internet forum.
- Creating conditions for authentic learning and cooperation
  For first three days the main goal was to let participants get to know each other by using a variety of exercises, games and simulations. All those activities not only made the integration and communication easier for students, but also prepared them for the next tasks. On the third day they underwent workshops that provided knowledge and training in particular skills, which enabled them to conducted field research. Students participated in workshops on: photography, social research, acting, journalism, movie making and others. Moreover, students themselves planned the field research, eg. prepared questions to interview local inhabitants.
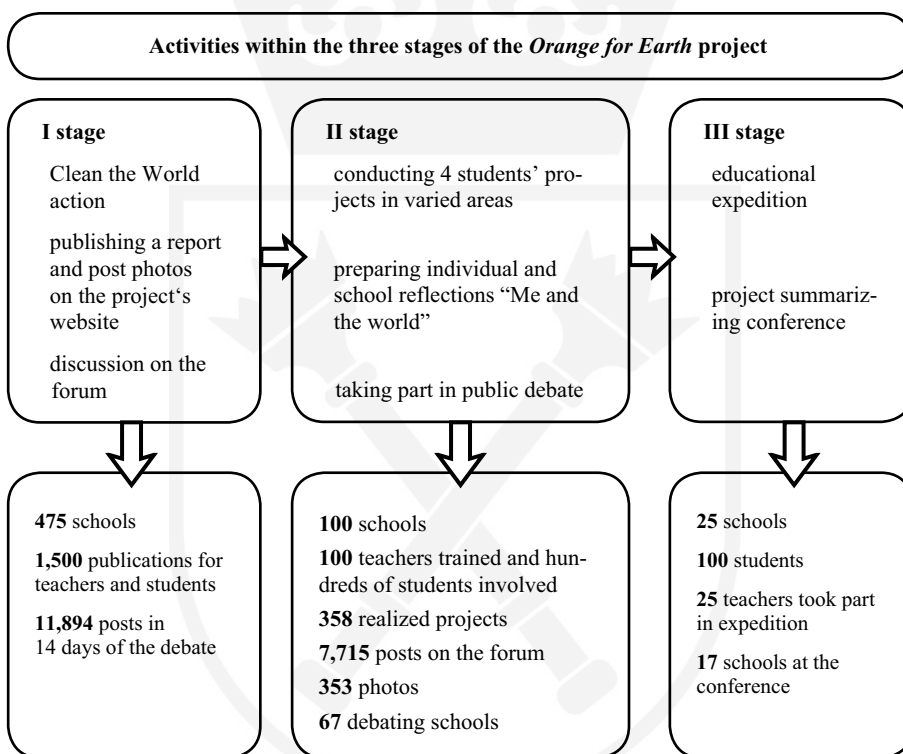- Local field research
  The fourth and fifth days of the Expedition was devoted to visiting museums and places that were important for the region, meeting local inhabitants and conducting field research. Through visits and meetings, students

tried to answer questions they had also previously asked. The main task for teachers and leaders in that step was to teach researchers to see not only a particular part of the reality, but also try to notice connections among scenes they observed and see them in a broader perspective.

- Reflection

  On the sixth day of the Expedition, four groups of researchers met in one place again and started to organize and select the data they had acquired. The next step was to prepare a final presentation for other groups. This exercise was not only to sum up and present information but also to reflect on what was most essential in the whole process of learning.

The following graph presents the project's stages and summary information.

Activities within the three stages of the *Orange for Earth* project

I stage

Clean the World action

publishing a report and post photos on the project's website

discussion on the forum

II stage

conducting 4 students' projects in varied areas

preparing individual and school reflections "Me and the world"

taking part in public debate

III stage

educational expedition

project summarizing conference

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475 schools

1,500 publications for teachers and students

11,894 posts in 14 days of the debate

100 schools

100 teachers trained and hundreds of students involved

358 realized projects

7,715 posts on the forum

353 photos

67 debating schools

25 schools

100 students

25 teachers took part in expedition

17 schools at the conference

Evaluation

As the project was slowly reaching its end we started to implement the process of evaluation during the second stage of the program. Thanks to various methods and tools (survey with teachers in second stage of the program, survey with teachers participating in the third stage, on-line survey with students, interviews

with students participating in the expedition) important information was obtained. The conclusions provided us a better perspective on what students and teachers gained from the participation in the program.

The most important conclusions (facts):

- 94% of students were satisfied with participation in the program,
- 92% of students admit, that thanks to the program they learned how to seek information,
- 90% of participants said, that thanks to the program they understood that teachers are not responsible for the learning process, instead they, the students are,
- 87% agreed that they feel more comfortable with giving public presentations,
- The most frequent answer for the question "What happened during the program" was "I had fun working (with) this method,"
- As to the advantages of the program, most of the students enumerated "learning dialogue" and "doing something for others,"
- More than a half of respondents point to the advantages of active learning,
- One third of respondents got to know ways of public action and gained knowledge and new skills,
- The biggest weakness of the program was the tight schedule and working on the projects after school time.

This is how the project was seen in "raw numbers," but what does it say about the Polish school and its main actors: teachers and students? While digging deeper into the results of the research we find a rather foggy image of the project's impact on the school. On one hand answers to direct questions are very optimistic: the project was important for both students and teachers. But when asked if the project has changed their school – they do not see such influence.

What is the reason for such a situation? There may be many different explanations:

- Students' projects were conducted mainly after classes so neither students nor teachers consider them as actions connected with school activities,
- It was up to students to pick a subject of the project – mainly they picked things that are not necessarily directly linked with school subjects,
- The project method might not be considered as learning method – it was pleasant (as it was stated many times) and unfortunately pupils often think about learning process as about something connected with memorizing things,
- The question regarding change in school was taken too broadly – maybe teachers and students have expected (or need) more visible changes to notice it.

These are only assumptions which might be a subject of further research. For now the unquestionable result of the project is many students and teachers who got to know project-based methods and declared that they would use it in the future as part of their learning. That may be a first step towards making schools in Poland fit the description described at the beginning of this paper: open, modern and democratic.

References

Mazurkiewicz G., *Bezradność szkoły. Jakich szkół potrzebuje społeczeństwo wiedzy?*, (in:) Materiały konferencyjne III Konferencji Naukowej „Wiedza i Innowacje", *Wiedza w rozwoju gospodarki*, 2007.