

Kinga BEREZKI

Talent Support Programme of Amoeba Foundation

1. Amoeba Foundation and its Activities

The development courses and talent support programmes of Amoeba Foundation (Hungarian: Amőba Alapítvány) have been at the service of the community since 1996. The Foundation has prepared hundreds of teachers in the fields of IT, foreign languages and project management, and helped hundreds of teachers and students acquire international ECDL and ECL certificates.

Under the international *Global Teenager Project* (GTP)¹, Sepsiszentgyörgy (Romanian: Sfântu Gheorghe, Saxon: St. George) was the venue of several nation-wide open projects, events of relevance for the students and their teachers due to their cultural diversity. Amoeba Foundation's success in community building is demonstrated by many accomplished plans:

- cultural preparation and three-week traineeship of students of Áron Berde Vocational Secondary School of Economics and Public Administration, Sepsiszentgyörgy,
- creation of a multimedia room in Mikó Székely College, Sepsiszentgyörgy, with the financial and professional contribution of the Foundation,
- support for the participation of students and teachers of the Protestant College and Kelemen Mikes National College, Sepsiszentgyörgy, in the international, guided, learning circle processes,
- establishment of the Count Lajos Batthyány Youth Club,² Sepsiszentgyörgy, in co-operation with the local Rotary Club,
- organisation of preparation courses in Romanian language for students from the countryside, jointly with the School Inspectorate of County Kovászna,
- in-service training for teachers organised jointly with the Dutch International Institute for Communication and Development³ to propagate ICT in education,
- support for the students of Áron Márton Gymnasium, Csíkszereda, during their visit to the Latvian Kraslava Gymnasium, a GTP partner school,

¹ <http://www.globalteenager.org>

² The first Romanian club created under the Global Teenager Project.

³ International Institute for Communication and Development

- international youth camp in Ojtoz, with the participation of the Netherlands, Latvia, Hungary and Romania,
- operation of the Talented Youth of Háromszék programme covered by the Foundation's on own funds, etc.

The Foundation has been a member of the National Talent Support Council since 2007 and it is a founding member of the Hungarian Federation of Talent Support Organisations. In the *network* of talent points established by the Council in 2008, Amoeba Foundation has been present as *registered talent point* since 2009 and as *accredited talent point* since 2011. The Foundation contributed from the start to boosting talent support in Transylvania; it was the initiator of the Transylvanian Talent Support Council⁴, established already in the meantime.

2. The Global Teenager Project

The target group of the Global Teenager Project (GTP), the talent support programme of Amoeba Foundation, is the age group of 12-18 of gymnasium and lyceum students. 24 countries of four continents take part in the project; almost 15 000 young people from all over the world get in touch with each other through the guided learning circle processes. They learn from one another and they get accustomed to diversity by using info-communication technology as their means. The project develops the youth in a complex way: it teaches team work, develops critical thinking and encourages to accept diversity in order to facilitate social integration and improving self-assertion.

Since 2000, Romania has established a national GTP school network, with Amoeba Foundation acting as its national co-ordinator. An annual approximately 1 500 students and 60 teachers take part nationally in the so-called *learning circles*. The participants get acquainted with the method of co-operative learning and, at the same time, they undergo complex skills development. Amoeba uses the project primarily to develop school-based education.

⁴ It was established on 16 October 2010 in Marosvásárhely. “The functions of the Council include the following: dialogue with other interest protection organisations and with the specialised state administration agencies; harmonisation of the talent support positions of the members; organisation of professional training, fora; establishment of talent identification and selection mechanisms and establishment, promotion and operation of the relevant forms of care; fund-raising for talent support; exploration and propagation of the best practices of talent support; establishment of the widest possible range of co-operation to assist the talented and the talent development programmes.” (Excerpt from the description of the *Hungarian Genius Portal (Magyar Gényusz Portál)*; cf: <http://geniuszportal.hu/tehetsegsegito-tanacs/tt-730-000-886>; downloaded: 09.05.2011)

2.1. Operation of the Project in Romania

Global Teenager is an international project for the youth focusing on communication and, internationally, on tightening the intercultural relations. The activity itself takes place through online learning surfaces, in the context of guided learning: student groups from all over the world process topics jointly, and they present their conclusions at the end of the circle in a summary. The topics are defined in advance and communication takes place at the participants' choice in English, Spanish, German, Arabian, Dutch or French.

The project has been developed and managed at international level by the International Institute for Communication and Development, functioning under the auspices of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has created the largest virtual school network since 1998.

Romania joined the programme in 2000. In the first six years, more than 1 500 students and 45 teachers took part in the three-month learning circles organised twice a year (in March and in September). 21 schools became part of the GTP network under Romanian co-ordination:

1. Lajos Áprily Main Gymnasium, Brassó (Romania)
2. Gergely Kis Protestant College, Baczkamadaras, Székelyudvarhely (Romania)
3. Buda Sports Primary School, Budapest (Hungary)
4. Colegiul Național "Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu", Buzó, (Romania)
5. Colegiul Național "Mihai Eminescu", Buzó (Romania)
6. Colegiul Național Alexandru Vlahuță, Râmnicu-Sărat (Romania)
7. Colegiul Național de Informatică "Grigore Moisil", Brassó (Romania)
8. Eureka Language School, Szászrégen (Romania)
9. Grupul Școlar Industrial de Transporturi Căi Ferate, Buzó (Romania)
10. Gyula Istvánffy Primary School, Miskolc (Hungary)
11. Zsigmond János Unitaran College, Kolozsvár (Romania)
12. József Katona Vocational Secondary School of Economics, , Budapest (Hungary⁵)
13. Liceul cu Program Sportiv "Iolanda Balaș Söter", Buzó (Romania)
14. Liceul Teoretic "Tudor Vladimirescu", Bukarest (Romania)
15. Áron Márton Main Gymnasium, Csíkszereda (Romania)
16. Mikes Kelemen Main Gymnasium, Sepsiszentgyörgy (Romania)

⁵ In the meantime, the Hungarian system became independent and hence Hungary now pursues its GTP activities in partner country status.

17. Sepsiszentgyörgy Protestant Lyceum for Theology, Sepsiszentgyörgy (Romania)
18. Szatmárnémeti Protestant Gymnasium, Szatmárnémeti (Romania)
19. Károly Székely School Centre, Csíkszereda (Romania)
20. Mikó Székely College, Sepsiszentgyörgy (Romania)
21. Zilah Protestant Wesselényi College, Zilah (Romania)

Besides the guided learning processes implemented twice a year, the Romanian activities of the programme include the following:

- teacher-student (in-service/upgrading) training in the fields of IT and foreign languages,
- support for the acquisition of ECDL and ECL international certificates⁶,
- summer camps,
- project open days and
- evaluation and introductory workshops for school co-ordinators.

The importance of the project lies first and foremost in that it modernises traditional school education. Teachers master the use of up-to-date tools to make their class activity more efficient. Through the system of distance education, students get acquainted with the co-operative methods of learning and with the traditions and cultures of other countries, and they can also develop their foreign language and computer driving skills. Thanks to the project, teachers and students obtain international certificates of their foreign language skills.

The Global Teenager Project grew into a decisive form of learning over the past ten years: nine youth clubs were formed at the participating schools in 2009; each has developed an image of its own and they have integrated the project activities into a system.

2.2. The Method of the Learning Circles⁷

The method of learning in *learning circles* was developed by American professional Margaret Riel in the 1990s. Dr Margaret Riel now works at SRI International's⁸ Centre for Educational

⁶ Thanks to GTP, Hungarian students and teachers were among the first to acquire the ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence) in Romania. The first ECDLs were obtained by three students in 2002, i.e. one year before the official start of the ECDL programme.

⁷ RIEL, M. *Learning Circle Teacher Guide, based on the AT&T Learning Circle Curriculum Guides developed for the AT&T Learning Network* (see <http://www.iearn.org/circles/lcguide>, downloaded: 26.08. 2011)

RIEL, M., POLIN, L., *Learning Communities: Common Ground and Critical Differences in Designing Technical Support*. = BARAB, S. A., KLING, R., GRAY, J. eds., *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Policy in California as senior researcher. Her research focuses on the interaction of IT and teaching/learning in three main fields: evaluation, learning environments and teacher training. before joining SRI, she was the director of the Centre for Research of the University of California where she developed partnership projects for schools and universities. She helped develop and evaluate a programme for school teachers, administrators and school communities on the use of technology in education. Dr Riel has always worked on projects related to the use of IT in education for the efficient transfer of knowledge. In the past twenty years, Dr Riel designed, researched and managed the learning circles which gather a multitude of teacher/student groups from all countries into a single project-based learning community via an electronic network. The network of learning circles is part of iEARN, the International Education and Resource Network⁹.

Learning circles represent a form of IT-based student group activities outside the school premises, integrated into a system. Co-operative learning has six distinct phases:

- Getting ready.
- Opening the learning circle.
- Planning learning circle projects.
- Implementing project-based student activities.
- Displaying the materials/outputs of the circle.
- Closing the learning circle.

Benefits of the method:

1. It stimulates common thinking and co-operation among students/teachers, and despite the relatively short duration of the circle activity this, in turn, impacts on further school activities.
2. It boosts learning efficiency through practical work experience and co-operation with students of approximately the same age from other countries.
3. It develops the reading/writing skills – students forward their comments, ideas to remote partners in writing.
4. It boosts the efficiency of teaching – the learning circle is a valuable professional forum for teachers.

⁸ <http://www.sri.com>






⁹ <http://www.earn.org>


5. It supports creativity – teachers exchanging their project ideas are enriched by new means.
6. It expands the learning and learner horizons. The projects of the learning circle encourage students to become more engaged in community life to obtain information. Hence they get closer to the community problems and their sense of social responsibility emerges.
7. It encourages the use of state-of-art technology in the traditional learning processes – the use of the computer for a definite goal develops the computer driving skills of teachers and students.

The essence of the GTP learning circle, i.e. asking questions and giving answers, culminates in a summary at the end of the guided process. The activity is pursued in learner groups of 10-12, and ten groups make up a circle. The circle is defined by the topic and the language. Hence “learning” takes place in a three-month learning period in parallel in English, Spanish, German, French, Dutch and Arabic, respectively, and it concerns certain chosen topics (travel, human rights, myths and legends etc.). For example, the student group in Grade 9 of Áron Márton Gymnasium, Csíkszereda, chose the topic of “Teenlife” in English, at basic level. Hence it became part of the Teenlife Communication-based Learning Circle where it co-operated with groups from other countries, in English and at basic level, over the three-month guided learning process. The activity is supervised by mentor teachers. Within the group, every member asks the group a question on the given topic. Hence every group member receives one question less than the number of the group members which they answer in the following period. On the basis of the answers, the group members summarise what they have learned; they start out from what they knew about the issue originally, why the question was asked, what similarities and differences were discernible in the answers relative to their original knowledge, and what were the results of the comparisons. This way, they go through a complex learning process which develops their critical spirit, the capacity to grasp the essence, openness, co-operation, the sense of responsibility, the problem-solving skills, patience and listening to others.

The three-month learning process comprises several stages, as illustrated by a 2010 cycle schedule of the learning circle¹⁰:

¹⁰ <http://www.globalteenager.org>

	<p>1. Getting ready (22.02.2010–28.02.2010) 0th week</p> <p>Acceptance of invitations and delivery of test messages to the learning circle. Introductory workshop exercises; teachers prepare the student groups for the learning process. Solution of any problem with the assistance of the national coordinator and the international facilitator.</p>
	<p>2. Introduction (2010. 03. 01 –2010. 03 07.) Week 1</p> <p>Official opening of the learning circle with the greeting letter of the facilitator. Introductions of teachers and students; greetings through letters by the class and the teachers.</p>
	<p>3. Questions (08.03.2010–21.03.2010) Weeks 2--3</p> <p>Each group formulates a question related to the topic, according to the quality criteria, and sends it to its circle partners.</p>
	<p>4. Answers (22.03.2010–25.04.2010) Weeks 4--8</p> <p>Each group carries out research, collects information and answers the questions addressed to them. At the same time, the answers to the question asked by the group are being received.</p>
	<p>5. Summary (26.04.2010–09.05.2010) Weeks 9--10</p> <p>The groups make summaries based on the answers they received and send them to their circle partners.</p>

	<p>6. Closing (10.05.2010–21.05.2010)</p> <p>Weeks 11–12</p> <p>Delivery of on-line evaluations, farewell letters.</p> <p>The learning circle closes with the facilitator’s letter of acknowledgement.</p>
---	--

International facilitators evaluate the group activities on a permanent basis, by a pre-defined score system and, at the end of the process, the participants themselves make on-line evaluations.

The Romanian groups are subjected to more comprehensive evaluation: besides the score table drawn up by the facilitators, GTP activities between the learning circles are covered as well (organisation of open school days, competitions, awareness-raising on projects etc.). The annual achievements are presented and the best-performing groups are awarded once a year at the so-called Project Open Days, in the presence of a large number of invited guests.

2.3. YooToo! Youth Clubs in Romania

The Global Teenager Project has grown into a real movement at the participating schools. It has become well-known at school level, and many teachers have adopted the method applied in the GTP and strive to use it in teaching practice as often as possible.

This evolution triggered the need to implement the GTP in an organised form within the schools. On the initiative of Amoeba Foundation, school clubs were formed. The clubs have their respective independent seats, publicity guidelines and internal regulations, and they host various activities beyond the learning circles: roundtable discussions with invited guests; school GTP days, competitions, camps, planning and fund-raising. The young people learn how to make, write and implement applications to raise funds for executing their plans. In Romania, nine youth clubs were formed under the name of YooToo!¹¹. The costs of the deployment of the system were covered by the Youth in Action Programme supported by the EU¹² in 2008--2009.

YooToo clubs in Romania:

¹¹ For more detail on the clubs, see the www.amoba.ro and www.yootoo.pbworks.com websites.

¹² Programme created pursuant to the agreement of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Member States of the European Union (*Youth in Action*) which supports the non-formal education programmes of the youth. Duration: 2007-- 2013.

1. Economical High School, Buzau
2. “Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu” National College, Buzau
3. “Grigore Moisil” National College of Computer Science, Brasov
4. Eureka Language Centre, Reghin
5. Count Lajos Battyhányi Youth Club, St. George
6. “Tudor Vladimirescu” High School, Bucharest
7. Áron Márton Gymnasium, Csíkszereda
8. Károly Székely Technical School Centre, Csíkszereda
9. Wesselényi Reformed High School, Zalau

The clubs function in the lyceums as independent entities, governed by jointly defined regulations. Club activities include co-operative learning, roundtable discussions, sport and cultural events, thematic competitions, camps and school days. Since the club members and the students of the GTP school take an active and direct part in the activities they plan, this upgrades their entrepreneurial and initiator skills. Consequently, the YooToo! youth clubs have become the development workshops of the schools concerned, and they promote the social integration of the youth. They represent resources for the schools which boost, indirectly, the quality and effectiveness of education.

3. Summary

The review of the intellectual and material proceeds of the decade-long operation of the GTP in Romania warrants the statement that a development network has been established and stabilised within the national school system of the country. This is shown, specifically, by the following:

- Twelve 12 theoretical lyceums and school centres take part in the project on annual average;
- almost 5 thousand students and a hundred teachers undergo personality development through the learning processes of the project;
- nine youth clubs were formed;
- GTP students and teachers took part in 5 international camps;
- 25 workshops and 12 professional training events were organised;
- 170 student prepared for and passed the ECDL exam;

- 54 teachers took part in professional in-service training.

Participation in the project was a cultural and intellectual experience for the students and taught a novel approach to the teachers. Teachers learned to look at the students with a fresh eye, and the authoritarian and often rigid traditional method of educational has been replaced at the participating schools by the much more efficient method of collective learning.

Literature

RIEL, M. *Learning Circle Teacher Guide, based on the AT&T Learning Circle Curriculum Guides developed for the AT&T Learning Network* (see <http://www.learn.org/circles/lcguide>, downloaded: 26.08.2011)

RIEL, M., POLIN, L., *Learning Communities: Common Ground and Critical Differences in Designing Technical Support.* = BARAB, S. A., KLING, R., GRAY, J. eds.. *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.