

Push the Boundaries: Artistic Empowerment Program for Sarawakian Youth in Malaysia

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June - August 2019. Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

Background and Importance

At UWC Adriatic, I befriended Song, a Sarawakian, who exposed me to the struggles faced by the Sarawakian people. The friendship that unites us developed throughout the years, overcoming the cultural barriers through the use of arts and storytelling. We relied on films, music, photography and painting to reflect our individual struggles, bringing us closer in understanding one another. We believe that through art people can discover their own voice, allowing them to express their concerns and views while building connections with the others.

Sarawak, a state nestled in East Malaysia, is ethnically diverse with inhabitants coming from a variety of backgrounds. Despite being a resource-rich state, Sarawak remains one of the least-developed regions in Malaysia with one of the highest rates of poverty in the country. This is partly due to economic disparity between those living in rural and urban areas, a lack of access to facilities and a deficit of creative approach in solving such issues. In a state where people are so diverse in terms of cultural and economic backgrounds, there exists a shortage of understanding and communication between the ethnic groups. The ethnically diverse Sarawakian youth are presented only with information that is screened through the lens of the community, to which they belong, propagating racist or biased stereotypes that have been widespread amongst them.

We believe that peace can be maintained if the gap between the communities shrinks, allowing people of different communities to come together. Therefore, we have chosen to use art as a tool that ultimately leads to the promotion of peace. We believe that artistic expression can open one's mind towards new possibilities of understanding one's self, surrounding communities, and the world.

In Sarawak, the arts are generally neglected as a less important field compared to STEM subjects. The youth are often discouraged from pursuing artistic interest, as it is believed to not be profitable in the long run. Despite this, we believe that cultivating creativity through the arts is a necessary tool for the holistic development of an individual, encouraging original problem-solving skills and nurturing curiosity. Therefore, by empowering the youth with these skills, and offering them a platform to freely express themselves, we hope to help build a generation of change. We aim to nurture dialogue among different communities in Sarawak, encouraging discourse about issues concerning the society, which in the long run will foster and strengthen peace. We believe that art is powerful to link the individual struggles, to the ones of the community. The pen and the camera are tools to help those that were voiceless in the past to come out and share their views of the world with others.

Project Details and Goals

The aim of this project is to teach school-aged children how to use art as a form of expression while developing their technical abilities, especially those that involve the utilization of modern equipment. Consequently, we intend to intertwine the arts and the use of technology (such as digital cameras, computers, and audio recording equipment), towards the large aim of breaking the communication barriers between different communities. We believe that by doing this, not only will the youth learn to express their opinions better (a step that leads to understanding between different communities), but the skills gained will be of relevance in their future careers.

In this program, we will expose children in rural villages and urban communities to various forms of artistic expression such as photography, poetry and storytelling. Apart from offering them the tools, we will also engage the youth in exercises, through which they will express their daily struggles and those of their communities.

In order to motivate the participants to engage in the arts, we believe that by exposing them to successful presentations of arts in the modern struggle of other people will further their interest. They will be presented with videos, stories and presentations of people that have incorporated the arts in their personal life and career, and how it benefited them.

To make the project more accessible and to help the youth spread their message even further, a website that will host their creations will be freely available to the public. The website will be a tool for the youth to share their art, even after the project ends. The project will end with the opening of arts exhibitions in all the schools we work with. In this manner, the youth will have the chance of showcasing their creations, while inspiring others not to give up on the arts, but rather to embrace it in their holistic development.

The grant will be used to purchase needed materials that will be donated to the rural and urban schools after the program ends: cameras, laptops, and craft supplies.

As the youth become equipped with new methods of expressing themselves, we believe that the existent barriers of race or economic background between them will start to fall. Consequently, they will learn how to collaborate in developing their passion for creative work and be more inclined to embrace multi-disciplinary approaches in solving issues related to their communities. They will be offered the tools to integrate arts in a modern 21st-century economy, breaking the stigma that creative work is of lesser importance.

Project Timeline

The project will last seven weeks. Each week, starting from the third week of June, we will visit six schools, namely SK Semada Serian, SMK Sungai Tapang, SK St Giles, SK Lubok Antu, SMK Batu Lintang and SMK Siburan. We will spend five days at each school (after-school hours) to implement the project. The workshops we will hold will include the introduction of the youth to the materials, the presentation of successful stories, and then practical individual and group exercises. In the seventh week, we will curate and open various art exhibitions in Kuching (in the schools we have worked with) to display the works of the program participants. The details of our program at each school is as follows:

- Day 1: Ice-breakers and getting to know each-other by sharing personal stories. Short introduction to photography, storytelling and poetry.
- Day 2:
 - Workshop 1: Photography - the art of expression and documenting. Learning how to share one's struggle or story through photography and video.
 - Workshop 2: Poetry and storytelling - learning the art of storytelling. What makes a compelling story? What makes a good poem?
- Day 3:
 - Workshop 1: Expressing the self through photography. Using the camera and editing techniques as ways to reflect the individual thoughts, to express oneself.
 - Workshop 2: Expressing the self through poetry and storytelling. Finding power in words, in order to express one's views of the world.
- Day 4:
 - Workshop 1: Expressing social struggles through photography
 - Workshop 2: Expressing social struggles through poetry/storytelling
- Day 5:
 - Collecting the materials to create a small exhibition in the school, presenting the outcomes to an audience and recording them digitally for the online platform.

*Note that the workshops will be held simultaneously and participants will be allowed to choose which they would prefer, but will be encouraged to stick with one throughout the duration of the program.

Future Impacts and Sustainability

The program that we are trying to create would be freely available for people all across Malaysia to take and to implement in their communities, in order to facilitate the development of the youth. Cameras, computers and other materials will be given to the school administration, giving students the opportunity to create and submit more of their artwork to the online platform. Our hope is that once participants gain the confidence to create pieces of art that encourage dialogue, discrimination based on racial differences will be lowered and peace will prosper. We believe that by offering the youth the tools of creation, while ensuring them of its relevance in the 21st-century economy, they will find better ways of solving the existent issues in their communities through a creative manner. We also hope that the participants of this program will take over from us and run it in the future, sharing with the future generations what we shared with them.

About the Author

I am currently a freshman at Bowdoin College, originally from Romania, but I have been living in Italy for the past two years where I have attended UWC Adriatic. While attending UWC, I worked in implementing two Project Weeks, one taking place in Romania and another co-organized in Bosnia Herzegovina and Slovenia, aimed at promoting peace amongst people of different cultures. Befriending Song, I came to understand more about the struggles of the Sarawakians, while exposing her to the experiences of the Southern Romanians. Reflecting on what we have learned from each other, we decided to organize this project, in hopes of spreading peace and understanding amongst the Sarawakian community.