Section 1

a) UWC Short Course “Living Together - Navigating Common Grounds”
Istanbul, Turkey
Bard College
Saim Saeed, Pakistan, Bard College
Mahindra UWC of India
www.short-course-turkey.uwc.org
uwclivingtogether.tumblr.com

b) The Short Course was a two-week long course for young participants from Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region aiming to create dialogue between the regions and to encourage participants to become active members of society. With 52 participants from 24 different countries we had 2 weeks of stimulating discussions and workshops on a range of topics including identity, politics and political systems, civil society and social movements, conflict analysis and mediation, and migration and integration.

c) Apart from the Davis Foundation, the project was sponsored by the UWC - an organization of international high schools, and the UWC National Committee of Turkey. Otherwise we had numerous contacts and coordinators within Istanbul itself who were coming in for workshops and presentations. As for other sources of financial aid, we have done a couple of crowdsourcing campaigns from which we have gotten 6000 dollars and a German NGO called emPower has donated 4000 dollars. This enabled us to give need-based scholarships to our participants. Those who were able to pay contributed a sum total of 15,000 dollars to our budget in participation fees.

d) The Short Course program evolved around three pillars: theory based discussion during the theme days, practical engagement with societal issues during the community interaction days, and finally encouraging participants’ agency through guiding the development of their individual projects.

Our theme days addressed the following topics: Identity (Political, Religious, Cultural); Politics and Political Systems; Civil Society and Social Movements; Conflict Analysis and Mediation; Migration and Integration; and Education and Knowledge. During these theme days where we explored the above topics through lectures, games, simulations, discussions, theatre and more. Participants were encouraged to intellectually engage with questions but were also required to reflect on how these topics applied to their lives and personal worldviews.

As one of our participants wrote: 'Actually at the Short Course they don’t teach you at all. They involve you and that’s enough. You’re involved when none of your questions is considered stupid, when you get answers for them, when you agree or disagree, when everyone listens to your opinion no matter how different from theirs it may be. You are involved. That’s enough to understand.' During the Community Interaction Days, participants worked in smaller groups to develop specific project skills and knowledge that would supplement their knowledge gained through the theme days and foster their confidence with regard to their own individual projects. They worked with a street photographer and explored theatre of the oppressed, encountered observers and activists of Gezi Park, critically engaged with women’s issues and women’s rights organizations and learnt about social enterprise. The individual project sessions were regularly woven into the program, guiding the participants from the identification of issues they felt passionate about or a problem their community faced to developing a detailed project proposal and delivering their first fundraising pitch.

Overall, the project was a great success. The 52 participants and 20 facilitators benefitted enormously learning a lot from each other. The hosting school in Turkey is keen to run a similar project again next year and the community was keen to learn more about UWC Short Courses. The local Imam was so impressed by the diverse crowd of participants that he invited all of us to his family home for Eid. Furthermore, more than half the participants have got very detailed and realistic individual project plans which they will put into practice within the following year in their local communities. Precisely these individual projects and the future interaction of our participants with their local community is the legacy of the Short Course that makes it into a ‘force for peace and a sustainable future’.
Naturally smaller problems caused through the language barrier or cultural differences arose. Luckily, working with an incredibly skilled and flexible team enabled us to overcome any problems quickly and find alternative ways of making sessions the best they could be. For example, we had not been informed the school would be closed for Eid festivities, and had to vacate the premises. As we could not use the school seminar rooms for workshops in that case, we swiftly adapted to holding discussions in outdoor spaces or the local cafe during those five days of national holiday.

The school is keen for another Short Course, possibly for longer than two weeks, to happen on its premises next summer. As a coordinating team, we will be involved in organizing a UWC Short Course seminar this December in Berlin. There, teams and individuals interested in organizing Short Courses from all over the world will come together for three days to discuss and share best practices. Our experience from this successful Short Course in Turkey will certainly be a relevant contribution.

Section 2

The theme of the Short Course was Living Together. I think we were all aware that we live together because we don’t have a choice, as Judith Butler was sagely put. Now the cynic in me would define peace as living together with the fewest amounts of problems arising as possible. But after the Short Course, the idea that both the facilitating team, including myself, and the participants were getting our heads around was that living together peacefully is not just the absence of violence, but the circumstance in which people and ideas evolve collectively. Peace is not just the absence of violence, but also the enhancement of a progressive collective consciousness that enables a community to look outside of itself rather than being mired in the internal structures of identity and communal politics.

We introduced the participants to the gay rights movement in Turkey by screening a film, and taking them to gay rights organizations and introducing them to gay rights activists. A lot of the participants had never met an openly gay person before, and admittedly, there was trepidation. But after intense discussions and Q and A sessions, we had participants not only becoming tolerant of LGBTQ people, but also actively taking up their cause. Thus we can see how the course has influenced everyone who attended, and I think dividing that drive toward peace into short term and long term does not quite highlight the value of that contribution. Participants have either been compelled to think about issues that they had never thought about before, and they have also profoundly changed their opinions about things they had already thought about. The manifestations of these changes come in grand and small instances. One participant realized that ‘feminism’ is not a bad word. Another decided that she would try and educate every Syrian refugee despite his or her displacement. Actions are the most direct manifestation of who people are, and I believe we have changed the very core of who attended the short course, and we saw the change in their actions from the very beginning of the short course.

This project was a transformative experience. We had plenty of participants that came from conflict-ridden countries mired in the same identity and communal politics that I am referring to. What changed my way of thinking were their attitudes. They refused to see the world as black and white, as ‘us’ and ‘them’ despite the fact that we designed this course in which we had a Middle Eastern camp and a European camp. The burning question for the participants was not “how can we look at the world differently?” but “how can we change the world?”

I learnt that the world is more complicated and interesting than I thought it was. For example, we had a Syrian participant whose ancestors came from the Caucasus, and his race was ostensibly Caucasian. This should not have come as a surprise because under the Ottoman Empire, people from all over the empire moved around. They were from Circassia or the Balkans or the Caucasus or the Crimea or the Levant. Hence, the definition of terms like ‘Turk’ or ‘Arab’ is steeped in a history we do not consider, and has many answers. I learnt to not see the world in black or white. More broadly, I realized the critical value of human contact. As a writer, I had forgotten how important it is to have physical contact with the subject that you write about. The value of collective experience cannot be matched by the isolation of typing on a computer. I shall continue to do more interactive work.

“What is home? Home is not the place you live in, nor the place where you were born, neither is it the nationality on the passport you hold. Home is the place were you are treated for who you are, the place you are happy in, happy because of the people that live with you. So thank you all (participants, facilitators, coordinators) for making this place my home.” Ahmad Abdulhalim, Palestine