How to Start and Maintain a Succesful Project - Reflections on Clowning by Veronika Risnovska

CLOWNING

Case Study

Clowning project aims to provide its participants with skills of empathy that they can later use in work with kids as well as in their everyday life. It teaches people how to find creative solution and approaches at any given situation and most importantly teaches them how to come out of their comfort zones and jump into everything new and scarry that comes boldly.

How it all started:

It was not only easy way to keep this project and its existence, but let's start from the beginning.

To be honest, I did not find clowning myself, it was more that clowning found me five years ago in the middle of the Balkan´s in one beautiful city called Mostar. I was studying physical theatre but was also very passionate about social sciences, community service, and social engagement. I was thinking about how to bring these fields together, and then I changed schools. In my new program I was expected to do social services, and the school was already offering clowning as a club in social service activities, so I took part in it. Even though the clowning we did back then was more performative than social, I directly found myself in it. Then I slowly started taking the club over, turning it into a more theatrical but also social-service oriented club. Then I met a person that really helped me to dive deep into the whole magic of medical clowning, an amazing Danish girl who's been clowning for three years that came to give us a workshop. So everything happened very naturally, organically. But after I had finished at that school, I didn't think about continuing clowning much. But then I was taking some time off and everytime I would get bored or feel as if I was starting to lose control over my life, I would go and clown for different organizations, NGOs, or just simply give workshops to people. It was only last year that I realised clowning is something that goes

with me everywhere I go. That silent, almost invisible presence of a red nose in my pocket has been there for every minute of my days in the last five years.

When I came to Bard College in Berlin and heard about the Civic Engagement Fellowship opportunity it was clear to me that this is the perfect platform to bring clowning to Berlin.

One thing I learned from this process of getting to clowning is that you never know when in life you stumble upon something that will develop into greater and long-lasting project. Sometimes you do not plan for things, because you don't even know about their existence but they await for you in somewhere on your way. The only thing you need to do is to simply say yes to anything you might encounter.

Target Group:

In the beginning, actually for almost first three years , I thought clowning is mainly reaching to help the kids from marginalized groups to have autonomy in decision making and attention they deserve. But more and more I personally started to focus on teaching than working with kids, I realised clowning is not only about the kids, but also about the participants that undergo the training. And perhaps, the way I structured the project at BCB is more targeting

the clowns than the kids although the actual benefit of kids from clowns´ visits cannot be denied. There are many studies showing how social clowns help the kids, but no one ever made a study about how clowning effects clowns themselves, which is something I have started to focus on more and more as I founded this project in Berlin. So sometimes it is ok to shift your targeted group a little, or perhaps add a new one. In each project you should leave some room for flexibility and change.

How Clowning Helps:

On its initial basis clowning brings autonomy to kids whose lives are often structured by institutions they live in. They do not have much room for making their own decisions about their daily schedules. The first rule of every clown is that a clown never says no. This way a clown completely submits to a kid and give the child a freedom to gain power over someone in their lives, power to make decisions, not only for himself/herself but also for someone else. For participants it is also this rule that brings them to leave their comfort zones and boldly jump into new situations, find creative solutions. This rule also teaches clowns the art of active listening to really understand what a child wants from them. The skill of active listening is then the main base for existence and deepening of empathy, which clowns can later use in their personal lives too.

How I developed My Teaching Metods:

From years and years of experience, since the point in time where I had to take over clowning without really knowing what it was My own format of teaching the art of clowning has been developing for a long time. It has been developing with every volunteer I meet, every organization I work with, every kid I meet, every moment. And yes, I use present perfect because it is still a process that is not done yet. I am a teacher but also a learner, and I learn a

3

lot from all my clowns — from their needs, their struggles, from the new countries I bring the clowning project to, from every single interaction, from my artistic projects outside of clowning.

I started teaching clowning as a simple pantomime format before realising how much psychological work it demands. So I went through different peer support training, martial arts practices, and movement therapy. Then I went back to circus studies and performances, and only then did I connect all I learned and develop my own approach to spreading the beauty of circus arts to other people. The language development part is based on physical poetry, a physical theatre style that was developed in the Czech Republic only 20 years ago. The simple exercises rise from no theatre, butoh theatre, and simple body-mind practices from several martial arts that performers often use to stay present and energized on the stage. This also goes back to active listening and empathy skills. And then, of course, the puppet work, sounds, the voice, and movement exercises are directly derived from physical theatre practices. I guess I stole a little bit everywhere and put it together.

Structuring Clowning at Bard College in Berlin:

When you have a project that travels with you, you always need to adjust it different environments and people. Starting the project at BCB I thought that it was gonna be the same as when I lead the project in Mostar and we will meet once a week for a training and after two first two months will also start visiting refugee camps, hospitals and orphanages. Only I did not realise that different places needs different structures, but luckily I found that out pretty soon. University students are generally busier than high-schoolers and it is also harder to make them motivated to do an extra activity on campus, if they have the entire city of Berlin full of possibilities on their hands. The way I went about it, is that instead of having clowning each week, we have one longer (approx. 3 hours) session once a month. After the first semester when people I trained, we start visiting refugee camps around Berlin. These visits happen on top of trainings and I also try to keep it as once a month events.

So you're good looking, have a wonderful family live in a nice house and have a well paying job

But can you juggle?

What I learned from this is that it is very important to know how o get over your initial ideas and dreams. You cannot be attached to things you planned big. Instead just observe your environment and see what is needed and possible. If you do that and don't try to force it things will become big on their own naturally.

Reflections:

Reflections are an important part of Clowning. After each visit of refugee camps I make my clowns reflect first as their clowns, then as themselves, collect these reflection and then share them in a group. It might be hard to see marginalized kids, and still be a clown following all rules of clowning. Because once you are with a kid it is completely different than what we train for, there are situations coming that noone and no training can prepare you for. And as much as try to prepare all the clowns for everything before they go, I also don't know what situation will rise in a concrete settings of refugee camps. I just give them skills to find creative and empathic solutions but the rest is usually at random.

That is why we have reflection circles in which we all share what was hard and how we dealt with it. We advice each other with possible solutions but also by hearing other people's struggles we learn to be empathic as well as know a little bit more about what we might encounter next time.

For met he reflection circles are also way of collecting my data, seeing how people slowly become better and better listeners and how sometimes they even reflect on how they use skills gained during clowning outside of workshops.
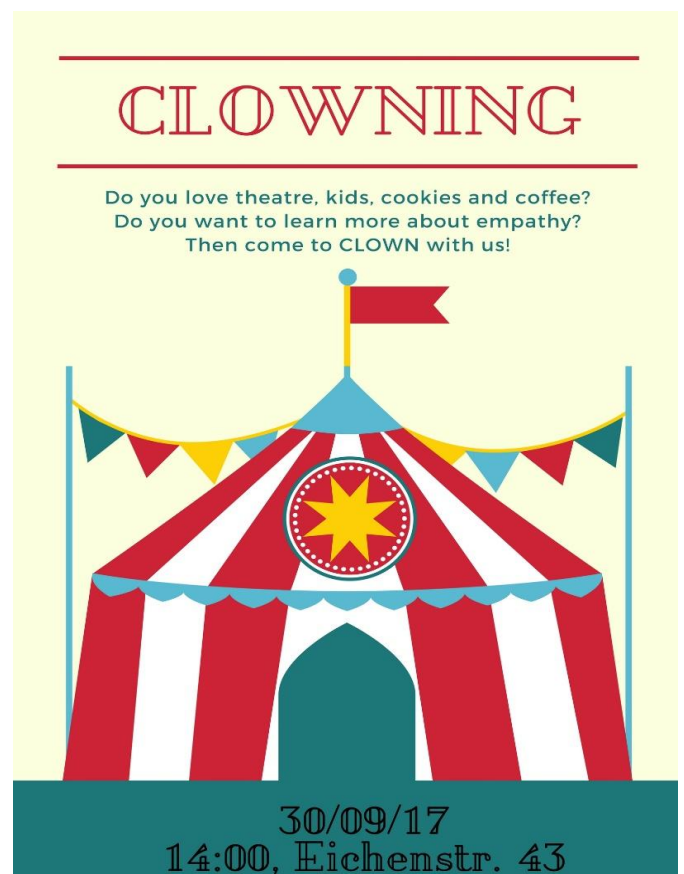

Running of the Project:

Now, Clowning is very established in its structure, but occasionally there are some additions to what we do. For instance, student life team invites to perform small skits at christmas parties, participate at De-Stress fest (biannual event organized by Pee Advisors), or family days organized by organization called Serve Your City. I am sometimes invited to give a workshop somewhere outside of campus. For me personally this is what makes the project successful. The fact that people reach to us and invite us. It does not only mean they know about the group of clowns at BCB, but also that they like and appreciate our work.

People in Project:

Besides the participants it is pretty much just me, me and me who is the leader, the finance person, the administrator, the contact person, the teacher, which now looking back at it I am trying to change. Why? Because it simply just became too much. As the project grows you realise you are only one person and you cannot do everything on your own. So currently I am in the process of dividing these roles in between participants that have been committed to the project since the beginning. But it took me almost two years to realise that I need this. The way it came clear to me was that I was on a point of burning out as a clown, and could not figure out why I am starting to hate what I love so much – my own project. Then I realised that it just took too much from my personal, academic and artistic life and there are ways to make it easier for myself and spread the responsibility around. Be smarter than me, divide roles in your project from the beginning, so then you don't even have to experience the state I was at.

Getting People in Clowning:

I am lucky to have BCB and Civic Engagement Centre who published many things about clowning already. This was even incoming students know about the project before they come. When the club fair comes at the beginning of each semester we are there, and people already know who we are. They sign up, I send them emails, they come for trainings. As easy as that. I don't put much efforts into advertising on social

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Do you love theatre, kids, cookies and coffee?
Do you want to learn more about empathy?
Then come to CLOWN with us!

30/09/17
14:00, Eichenstr. 43

media. Sometimes I make posters that I distribute around campus, tho. The question of advertisement and getting people involved is also a question of knowing your environment. At BCB we don´t need much, because i tis a small school, news spread quickly and reach almost every one. E-mails work very well as news carriers. But if you are at a bigger university, perhaps I would recommend starting a facebook page and instagram for you project. Because for people to be interested, they need to know about it first.

Future of Clowning:

As I am going for an exchange next year but also starting several new projects I feel like the time has come to take a pause from Clowning a little. Therefore I am passing the project to one student at Bard College in Berlin. Currently I organizing everything (finances, books, materials, contacts) so it is ready and in order to be received by someone else. I hope she continues to lead the project the way I did, but will also built a new approaches of clowning on the base I started. She is very interested in acrobatics, which I tried to do with my participants but since I am personally not very good at it it never worked to the extent I had wanted. I think, she, being a professional acrobatics teacher will finally bring it in in upcoming years. If you ask me why I think acrobatics is important for medical clowning I realised that any form of sport, but especially creative one helps people to me more flexible with their bodies and also free their minds. Besides stress and anger releasing acrobatics is also based od trust that clowns need more than anything else. So I will be happy to see the project develop into this direction a little more and add acrobatics to the physical theatre and improv trainings I founded. I hope Clowning will establish more network with organizations I started to be in touch with but we have not had enough time to really go deep into the possibilities of cooperation. What I am learning now, is that when you pass your project on, i tis definitely hard to organize and sort out everything to make it clear for the new leader, but

what is even harder is to give it freedom. See that your project can grow without you and maybe even take directions you had never seen coming before. I personally definitely want to keep continuing giving the workshops on my own, but I know it is the time to depart from leadership a little, especially after everything I had gone through this year, the moments that I almost burnt out because I simply just put too much on my shoulders. You always need to know where to stop and ask for what you need instead of just taking care of your volunteers, organizational team and project itself. I find that many leaders often forget about themselves and work beyond their limits with no breaks. And as amazing as it sound it is also dangerous. So, perhaps the most important advice I can give you, is that you too should know your limits and push them, but only a little and occasionally. You come first. That should be the rule no. 1.

The Importance of People:

One thing that I learned founding and organizing projects is that if I ever had to choose between 20 000 dollars and 20 great people who are willing to help I would always choose the people. The importance of having people who support you in a project is something I cannot stress enough and if you have them around you can really do miracles even without money. The importance of networking is undeniable. Because only if people know you and your project the project can grow and you will have more and more people to have as well as opportunities to go. So if I should tell you how to start and maintain a successful project from my own experience in a few words, I would say: go out, go to conferences, talk to people, be bold, share your ideas, do be afraid of speaking up, never say no, take care of yourself.