

WE TOGETHER - FOR THE CLIMATE, EDUCATION, DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT: *'We together' looks at the microcosm of society in the university town of Mittweida. This project brings the different facets and views as well as the people behind them closer together. Meeting spaces are created for people of different ages from different life contexts. These include public lectures, artistic micro-projects, experimenting with children, designing public spaces, etc. By choosing a children's book as a starting point, a door is opened that often remains closed to the youngest members of our society: The door to a social discourse at eye level. This project also aims to involve children in the participatory negotiation process on the topic of climate protection. The university is setting out and assuming social responsibility for life in Mittweida beyond the semester.*

KEY WORDS: *We together, third mission of the university, education, democracy.*

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: *I25, I26, P46.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The starting point for the current "We together" project was a call for proposals issued by the Stifterverband and the Klaus Tschira Foundation in cooperation with the ZEIT publishing house on the subject of "one university - one book". The basic idea is for members and students of a university to deal with a specific topic (the basic topic of the selected book) on the basis of a book. In addition, the Stifterverband's experts expect an impact on and participation by civil society.

The Chancellor of Mittweida University of Applied Sciences (HSMW), Sandra Kuhn, and Prof. Dr. Barbara Wedler (Faculty of Social Work) decided on a children's book. In the book "Paula's Journey", a family directly explores the question of why a chicken lays eggs in winter. On their travels, the six family members experience the

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beauty of the regions and countries they visit as well as the changes caused by accelerated climate change.

The submitted topic and concept convinced the experts. The HSMW not only received a 12-month grant, but also developed more and more opportunities for cooperation and effective democratic processes based on the theme of the book "Paula's Journey".

"We together" incorporates the individual project "one university - one book" into the university's overarching strategy, thereby playing a pivotal role in the execution of Mittweida University's "Third Mission."

2. METHODS

Based on the principles of the "service-learning approach", a teaching-learning concept was developed which is now subject to continuous further development. Service learning was originally developed in the USA in the 1960s as a teaching and learning program for schools. Altenschmidt and Miller refer to the connection between community service (voluntary commitment for the benefit of the common good) and learning (learning through experience). "Accordingly, service learning integrates the commitment to a (social) group into an organized learning experience and aims at 1) a better understanding of study content and subjects, 2) the development of personal values and 3) the formation of a sense of civic responsibility through social commitment and its reflection." (Altenschmidt & Miller, 2016). The teaching and learning opportunities combine the diverse possibilities of university teaching with civic engagement. The decisive factor is the experiential learning of the students, which makes the course content tangible in the practice of the community, of civil society.

Based on Altenschmidt and Miller, the following objectives of service learning are identified:

- Expanding specialist teaching through a deeper understanding of theory thanks to the practical relevance
- Independent action, teamwork, project management, etc. expand the ability to act
- Personal development receives an effective boost thanks to the assumption of the responsibility for social issues
- Experiencing the effectiveness of social action promotes the willingness to take on responsibility in civil society
- Thanks to the project assignment from real stakeholders, students become active in areas of current support needs
- The concrete learning experiences are reflected on with regard to the course content and their own attitude.

Service learning is already being used in various areas at the HSMW without being highlighted as such. The project "one university - one book" makes use of service learning and combines social and academic learning with social commitment. The extent to which the "service component" not only enriches the relevant subject but also addresses specific, practical requirements is explained below (Sporer, et al., 2011).

3. STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT

In an initial micro-project, the authors, a colleague and students from the Faculty of Media developed the application video for the Stifterverband (One University One Book, 2023).

The initiators created a central roadmap for the (first) funded project year as can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Roadmap for the initial project "One university - one book" as a sub-project of "We together"

In a further accompanying project, the media support for the main project was planned and implemented as part of a course at the Faculty of Media. This involved continuous consultation with the various stakeholders and documentary support (photos, short films, pictograms, posters, stickers, etc.).

Thanks to the presentation in the media of the project idea of bringing climate protection and the individual together, the project reaches other stakeholders in the city of Mittweida. With the button on the clothing, the idea is spread in the truest sense of the word and the QR code opens up access to and opportunities for participation in the project to anyone with a smartphone: in line with the idea: We together!

4. MILESTONES

There are milestones for the continuous documentation and media support of the project, which are characterized below.

The learning content of the "Coping with life situations" module includes questions on the social side of health and illness. "Paula's Journey" encouraged the students to deal with the health consequences of climate change. At the request of the staff at Mittweida secondary school, intensive collaboration developed between the university and the school, between university staff and teachers, and between students and pupils in the 2023/24 school year. In order to familiarize members of the university, the residents of Mittweida and the pupils of the secondary school with the topic and encourage them to participate, the students prepared a public lecture for November 2023 on their own initiative. The main points of the lecture were taken from the book "Paula's Journey" and creatively implemented in a hands-on lecture.

A second public lecture followed in March 2024. In consultation with the subject teacher, the students focused on the upper school level and increased the difficulty of the content. In the first lecture, the students imparted a lot of knowledge (from the children's book) and illustrated this with comprehensible material. The second lecture also referred to the regions of the world from the children's book, but increased the participatory part for the participants in the lecture (pupils, students and residents of the city). The lecture concluded with a group quiz, the winners of which were again given an assignment on climate protection. A winning construction kit for an insect hotel was hung up in the school garden. In the school garden lessons, the task for this age group was to observe the development from larva to insect and to plant habitats for insects.

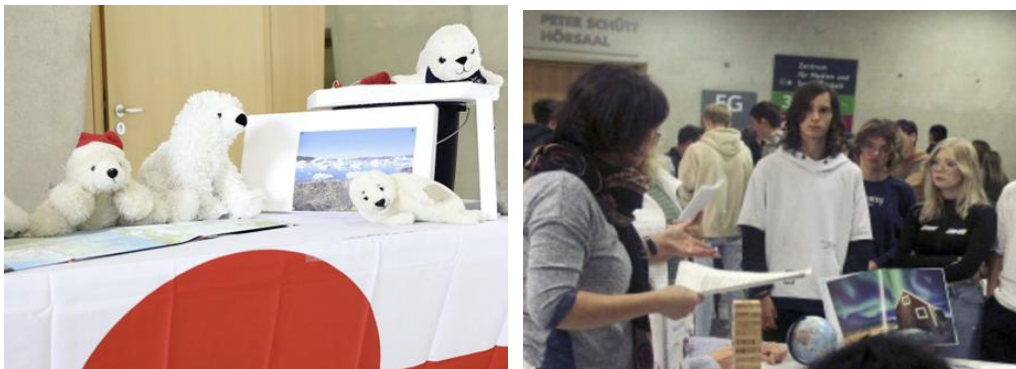


Figure 2. Pictures of the 1st and 2nd interactive lecture

The Night of Science at Mittweida University of Applied Sciences at the end of May was a highlight of the debate on climate protection and personal responsibility. Students and Year 9 pupils from the secondary school worked together for months. They met, distributed tasks, prepared content and ultimately developed joint Power Points on individual aspects.

These were presented jointly by three mixed groups of 3 students and 4 pupils in public lectures. In this joint process over the course of a school year, students and

pupils acquired knowledge about climate change and its consequences for people in different regions, in line with Paula's journey as the protagonist of the book.

Another milestone was the reading night in the city library for the 5th grade of secondary school in January 2024 (Figure 3). Students each read a chapter of the children's book "Paula's Journey". Using minimal resources, they offered an insight into the phenomena described and read aloud - eggs in winter, a simulated starry sky in South Africa, the smell of the garbage dump in Albania and much more. This event was also carefully thought through and planned by students and a specialist teacher (German).

The individual groups of pupils were given simple tasks, which they worked on using books from the library, in the reflection round the children were able to lounge on the floor and at the end there was a planting pencil. This was also linked to a small task for the children - planting, caring for and observing the growth of the spices. The opening of the reading night by the university's chancellor was of great significance. This not only acknowledged the school's concern, the children were addressed by a role model and the chancellor signaled: we as a university take responsibility!



Figure 3. Photos from the reading night

At the "Open Day" at the secondary school, those responsible for the main project presented themselves with the roadmap and questions for visitors to the "Open Day". Children, parents and grandparents were asked how they would like their school to be climate-friendly. The answers were categorized and supplemented by statements at the stand of the "One Uni - One Book" project and an offer to "experiment in the Park". In particular, 3rd, 4th and 5th graders from the region were able to generate oxygen in small experiments at Experimentieren im Park. Students and the authors used the opportunity for age-appropriate technical discussions and once again collected ideas for a climate-friendly school and city (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Photos from “experimenting in the park”

Each of the sub-projects described was characterized by a high degree of participation. Joining in, contributing ideas, presenting the knowledge gained and acting together strengthens personal development and allows participants to experience their own effectiveness. Because in the course of the process, ideas, words and "gimmicks" become actions. The mayor of the town, the trade association and other stakeholders provide support, for example, in greening the town, a frequently expressed wish. The (age-appropriate) evaluations of the events and reflection rounds with the students in turn form the basis for follow-up sub-projects.

5. ACTORS AND "THIRD MISSION"

In the case of Mittweida University of Applied Sciences, "We together" brings together members of the university and representatives of civil society - the secondary school, business representatives from the town, interested and committed parents. All of these stakeholders are interested in the same topic: what does climate change do to people and what can I do to improve the climate at the university, at school and in the town?

This common theme leads to continuous engagement with this topic and to the expansion of the topic-related network. The range of topics at the university, including research on bees, also offers growing opportunities for partners of the city of Mittweida to deal with the health, social, ecological, economic and cultural aspects of climate change. Networking, the choice of new tasks and the steps to implement individual tasks correspond to grassroots democratic processes that even schoolchildren are given the opportunity to learn.

In terms of the "third mission", a university focuses on teaching on the one hand and its impact on society on the other. One of the ways in which Mittweida University of Applied Sciences succeeds in raising the profile of environmental and health protection for members of the university and residents of the town is with "We together". Mittweida University of Applied Sciences not only supports the wishes of individual stakeholders from the community and the city in terms of content and personnel, it also supports students in developing their creativity by recognizing their achievements with credit points.

6. PERSPECTIVE

The project character of "One University - One Book" is lost in the continuous process of "We together" for climate protection in Mittweida, for education for all age groups, for democratic processes thanks to participation and for living the university's "third mission". What began with a prize for an individual project has become an ongoing process and is therefore truly sustainable.

The plan for the coming months is to address individual aspects such as

- A traveling exhibition of artistic exhibits by schoolchildren on the topic of climate change;
- Developing new participation formats (developing an environmental game);
- Dealing with global changes and local consequences;
- Discussion rounds with international guests from countries described in the book "Paula's Journey".

The scientific analysis of the teaching-learning projects, the evaluations and recommendations for the further development of the processes provide the framework for the university's mission: practice-oriented academic education in and for the region.

7. SUMMARY

Based on a children's book, climate change is thematised from different perspectives throughout the university and with children/young people and citizens of Mittweida. The topic of climate change should and should be made tangible and thus be brought to the attention of people of different ages. This process is accompanied by students who are studying as part of the "Service Learning" programme by getting involved, gaining experience in micro-project planning and working in a goal-oriented team. Partial results to date demonstrate the usefulness of this sustainable project. Further sub-projects are not only desired, but are already being planned. Further aspects of climate change will be the focus of the programme, the university's third mission. In the coming winter semester, students, pupils and residents of Mittweida will be taking action, greening the city center with plants and engaging politicians.

8. CONCLUSION

Climate change and all its consequences affect everyone, regardless of age or status, everywhere in the world. Using the opportunities offered by the university to sensitive children in particular to this realisation is existential. Choosing a children's book as the first step in this cognitive process has proved to be a good idea.

As it turned out, the work with the book opened up numerous innovations that have an impact on the university, schools and the city, and similar to the snowball principle, this has resulted in further requirements from the children's university, associations with a thematic exhibition and an international exchange on climate change using the Photovoice method. Support from students using the "service learning" teaching-learning format forms the scientific platform. A dynamic

programme that challenges, educates, is fun and brings people together has been found for Mittweida University and the city of Mittweida.

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