

What Makes the Difference in Being a Teacher at EGS?

Melinda Meyer

Since 1991 I have been the Director of the Norwegian Institute for Expressive Arts and Communication in Oslo, Norway. The expressive arts training comprises eight seminars per year over a period of four years. It takes place in a university college in the city. Students and teachers go home at the end of the day.

The expressive arts programs at EGS are completely different. Here we are in an intensive training during the summer, in which all the students and faculty live together in a little village 1800 meters above sea level in the Swiss Alps. This is a totally different learning process, challenging both for teachers and for students—a “summer camp” for adults. The teaching is so intensive that it is impossible to leave

campus, except between the two periods for those who stay for both. The possibility of stepping out of an alternative world and being able to step back in to your habitual world is gone. This provides a perfect learning environment for integrating new students and creating groups that must learn to live side by side with differences and still stay engaged and connected, maintaining calmness under stress, and being able to create solutions together.

In 2001 I taught a class in Social and Developmental Issues at EGS in which the majority of the students were from Palestine and Israel. In the midst of their conflicts, I tried to help them keep the arts in the centre, focusing on the stories that emerged for each individual in their encounter with the “third” (the piece of art they had created together), by fostering an atmosphere of sharing and compassion rather than one of competition and blame, us and them, right and wrong. In a dance/theatre piece where a dancer had to move through bodies that were trying to restrict her, her last sentence was: “There is still a little hope.” The image was like a dandelion finding a crack in the asphalt where the sun comes through and gives strength to grow.

The EGS campus functions as a third place, an alternative world where spontaneity and creativity can emerge. Students and teachers have to stick together and find creative and transformative paths in the face of conflict and crisis.

Such an environment demands a tolerance for intimacy and the ability to pace oneself. For some students (and teachers) the intensity of the training processes can be too much for comfort. If you are seen all the time and have nowhere to hide, you need a refuge for recoup-

ing and regrouping. It is necessary to create a situation where everyone can feel at home in a foreign place, something that is not easy.

What makes EGS different is the challenging learning situation. Both students and teachers are confronted in a way that you can avoid in traditional teaching institutions, but that you cannot avoid in real life. In this way, the problems in the world become problems in the class and, if they can be resolved, become pathways towards solutions for students' work when they leave. The difference at EGS is that we come to realize that even in a challenging world, "There is still a little hope."



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