

VIR PROJECT - GARDEN VOLUNTEERS RESHAPING THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF A BOTANICAL GARDEN

Project supported by the City of Ljubljana.

Tamara Jare

Slovenian Third Age University

ABSTRACT

Slovenian Third Age University and Botanic Gardens Ljubljana have established a group of Garden Volunteers for the first time. Students from Slovenian Third Age University have become active learners and volunteers in the garden, representing a tight bond between two educational institutions and community. The city of Ljubljana has recognized their VIR project as an important one for the community, giving this way an important recognition to students of Slovenian Third Age University garden volunteers as active participants for the benefit of the local community.

KEY WORDS

Slovenian Third Age University, Botanic Gardens Ljubljana, garden volunteers, VIR project, volunteering, learning, local community, botany,

GARDEN VOLUNTEERS-A NEW CONCEPT IN BOTANIC GARDENS LJUBLJANA

Slovenian Third Age University has been the leading educational institution regarding the involvement of senior learners in the region for the last 28 years. Its mission has been empowering older people to regain their social role ever since. Many older people involved in study circles at Slovenian Third Age University have studied different academic topics. Yet the need to open the gained knowledge towards community has evolved in new volunteering programs at the Slovenian Third Age University, Cultural mediators in museums, Cultural mediators at hospitals, Each one teach one, Sewing dolls, to name just a few of them. The wish to introduce more natural science programs at Slovenian Third Age University on one side and the vicinity of Botanic Gardens Ljubljana on the other hand, were the circumstances inspiring us to shape the concept combining education and volunteering, as well as education of the staff in botanical garden to understand older people and new social roles in society.

Slovenian third age University is one of the founding members of the EMIL network dealing with intergenerational learning and cooperation in Europe. Slovenian Third Age University has been actively and on a volunteering basis participating in the activities of this network. During one of the Emil network meetings (financially and morally supported by the Calouste-Gulbekian foundation) in Lisbon Tamara Jare from Slovenian Third Age University shaped the idea of a new project combining garden volunteering , organized learning and education of volunteer and the community. It took some time and required researching the needs and the readiness of the participants in the project (students-volunteers ,their mentors,U3 and Botanic Gardens as well the media).The project had from the very beginning several objectives: introducing the practice of combined education and garden volunteering, introducing new types of active relationships of older students in the community ,and above all with the younger generations, protecting biodiversity of the botanical garden and raising public awareness. Tamara Jare's decision was that student garden volunteers should broaden their relation to the public, to the public place by meeting and collaborating with garden volunteers in other botanical gardens over Europe which is yet to be done.

ABOUT BOTANIC GARDENS LJUBLJANA, IT'S HISTORY AND THE PRESENT SITUATION

Botanic Gardens Ljubljana as a research and educational institution with a 200-years long history is a learning public space par excellence, although too often understated in community. As such it has similarities with Slovenian Third Age University and also similar needs.

Students from Slovenian Third Age University had been studying botany with passion but without having a quality opportunity to validate this knowledge and make it useful within local community. The concept of garden volunteers was shaped-to motivate students to learn botany, ecology, history, etc. and to get familiar with the issues of the sustainability thus making them more responsible towards community. The innovative character of this student-garden volunteering is that a learning community has been established with different actors working together and learning from each other. There is a lot of mutual

learning, reciprocal learning, experiential learning and above all learning by doing. Student garden volunteers are not only volunteers -different botanical gardens in Europe and elsewhere have known them for decades, but they act as a learning tie between the two educational institutions and the community. This concept modifies the role of the botanic garden. Consequently the botanic garden is no mere just the university and educational institution but it is an institution that empowers its volunteers to step out meeting the needs of local community and society as a whole in the field of ecology, protection and sustainability. Maintaining biodiversity has namely become one of the key topics in Slovenia.

PROJECT VIR-GARDEN VOLUNTEERS AND COMMUNITY

A year after garden volunteers started their mission the VIR project got approval by Ljubljana municipality. The city recognized this project as an important one for older people and the local community and is partially supporting it.

The VIR project- Slovenian acronym for Garden Volunteers and Invasive Species -has been offering to the garden volunteers the possibility to learn about the botany of invasive plant species held in Botanic Gardens Ljubljana ,education been provided by Botanic Gardens of Ljubljana. Together with this institution our garden volunteers struggle against invasive plants. Garden volunteers, students from U3 have been offered a new public space owing to this project and they use it to perform their different learning activities, for interacting with other generations for presenting the results of the learning and for acting as mediators between Botanic Gardens Ljubljana and different NGOs. Thus they have become important ambassadors of Botanic Gardens Ljubljana. The number of visitors of the gardens has increased considerably as a result of it.

VIR PROJECT PERSPECTIVES

In the future we are planning to increase the number of active garden volunteers, to strengthen the learning ties among them and to develop educational programs for autonomous and group learning. Garden volunteers will become plant ambassadors with better knowledge about different plants. They will be responsible for presenting their plants to the visitors and also to the delegations of professionals. We are planning to customize our educational programs to the needs of all who are involved in the project. We are also planning to intensify the accompanying public campaigning thus changing the idea of older people's social roles.

CONCLUSION

Garden Volunteers, a bridge between Slovenian Third Age University an Botanic Gardens Ljubljana, demonstrate what active aging is, or can be. It shows the way to reestablishing a society based on community, exchange of knowledge and common endeavors. The project objectives have evolved from simple learning botany and simple volunteering in botanic gardens to a clear wish to actively participate in the community for the common benefit. Consequently community recognizes older garden volunteer's potential for its wellbeing. Moreover this project enables the necessary transformation of a public institution

approaching it to the members of the community. Basically it has been found that a double transformation has been made possible through this project- the transformation of older people to themselves and the transformation of the community and its actors, botanic garden having a key educational role in this process.

REFERENCES

Findeisen, D. (2010) *Univerza za tretje življenjsko obdobje v Ljubljani: stvaritev meščanov in vez med njimi*. Ljubljana: Društvo za izobraževanje za tretje življenjsko obdobje.

Jare, T. *European Map of Intergenerational Learning Concept paper: Botanical Gardens, Intergenerational Learning & Scientific Priorities for the 21ST Century: Botanical Gardens as a specific setting that fosters intergenerational learning*. <http://www.emil-network.eu/res/documents/theme/Concept%20paper%20-%20Botanical%20Gardens,%20Intergenerational%20Learning%20&%20Scientific%20Priorities%20for%20the%2021ST%20Century.pdf>

Dodd, J. & Jones, C. (2010). *Redefining the role of botanic gardens – towards a new social purpose*. Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG), School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester. Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI), Descanso House, Richmond. http://www.bgci.org/files/Worldwide/Education/Social_inclusion/social%20inclusion%20report.pdf