

Michael WIHLEND¹ (Tuebingen)

The World Citizen School – A space for self-organized learning of socially engaged student initiatives

Abstract

The civic engagement of students can contribute to all missions of a university: teaching, research, and transfer to society. At the same time, student initiatives are often overlooked in that context.

Through the example of the World Citizen School model, which was developed at the University of Tübingen, this workshop report aims to show how civic engagement of student initiatives can be anchored and promoted at universities. The focus is on the description of the model and the interplay of the various constituent aspects. The illustrations draw special attention to the often-overlooked potential of self-organized learning and engagement of student initiatives for university teaching.

Keywords

Student engagement, Civic engagement, Self-determined learning, Social Entrepreneurship, Non-Profit-Management

¹ email: wihlenda@worldcitizen.school



1 Civic Engagement and Student Initiatives

Using the example of the World Citizen School (WCS) model and the related activities of student initiatives, this article aims to show how the civic engagement of student initiatives was anchored and promoted at the University of Tübingen (Chapter 2). In chapter 3, possible transferable activities and aspects are explored. Chapter 4 closes with a reflection of the most important results and shows potential further developments of the model.

The demand for improvements in curricula and study conditions from the student body as well as the general civic engagement of students in and beside their studies is not a new phenomenon (FISCHER, 2006). Since there have been student committees or parliaments at universities, students have used these institutions to improve the prevailing teaching, research, and study conditions. However, the influence of political student groups at German universities is limited at most universities (DITZEL & BERGT, 2013; MÜLLER & VOEGELIN, 2002; WINTER, 2005). An important factor for the weak state of student participation is, above all, systemic. In general, valuable information is lost due to high student turnover. Each subsequent student generation builds up the necessary knowledge and networks for shaping higher education policy, which are lost when one generation of students is replaced by the next. Shortening the studying time by introducing separate bachelor's and master's degrees due to the Bologna process makes the situation even more difficult (KEELING, 2006).

However, changes in the scope of research, teaching, and study conditions are not only caused by political groups or faculties but also by student initiatives, which are often overlooked in the context of the development of higher education. Such initiatives are usually not part of formal bodies or committees. They can be seen as free groups or “communities of practice” that Wenger defined as “groups of people, who share a concern or passion for something they do and they learn how to do it better and as they interact regularly” (WENGER & TRAYNER-WENGER, 2015, p. 1).

In contrast to political groups, whose main focus is on political participation, these free groups pursue their aims, for example by organizing their own educational events. They can also appear as institutional innovators (DRUPP et al., 2012). Students and their initiatives are increasingly offered the opportunity to have their courses recognized with credit points for example by the centers for key qualifications of the universities (WIHLEND, 2015).

Against this backdrop, the WCS focuses on student initiatives from the outset. It follows the definition of civic engagement as formulated, for example, by Tom Ehrlich:

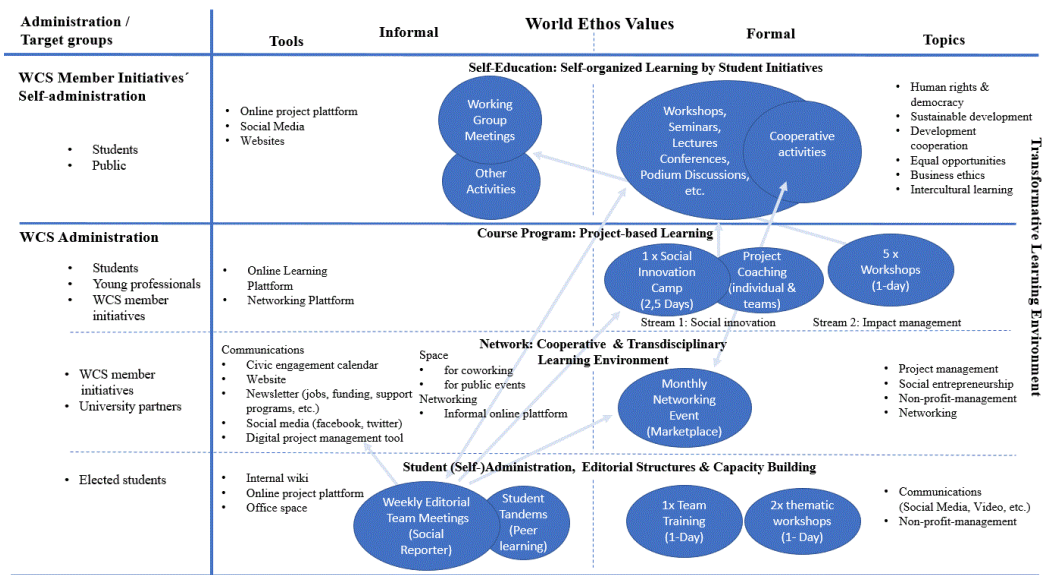
“Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes” (EHRlich, 2000, p. vi)

The WCS understands students initiatives as a subgroup of civil society initiatives and attributes them to the non-profit sector, which, according to SALAMON & ANHEIER (1998), is characterized by privacy as distinct from the government, by self-governing and a corresponding share of voluntary activities. As the term “student initiative” suggests, the membership structure is predominantly characterized by student members who are registered at a (German) university. Some initiatives are organized independently and are active as free project groups, while others are organized as, for example, local associations or belong to regional or global student organizations.

2 The World Citizen School Model

In May 2013, the Weltethos-Institut at the University of Tübingen launched the WCS model project. The aim of it was to anchor the student commitment institutionally within the framework of a holistic organizational model and, thus, to secure it permanently. The goal is to empower students to develop and use their

knowledge and abilities for the good of society. It provides a learning environment, which motivates students and supports them to take on social responsibility. As of January 2018, the WCS counts 23 member initiatives in Tübingen. Each semester, more than 200 voluntarily committed students learn from one another in informal and interdisciplinary networks, organizing educational activities themselves, engaging in cooperation, and starting projects. The students are supported by an engagement-promoting program by the Weltethos-Institut staff with regular input from external lecturers, coaches, and mentors.



Transformative Learning Environment

Figure 1: World Citizen School model

In the following, the corresponding aspects of the model are presented.

Educational Approach

Values

The goal of all the WCS activities is to create public welfare. The initiatives orient themselves around the world ethos values of humanity, mutuality, peacefulness, partnership, honesty, and justice as Küng defined them in his Global Ethic Project (KÜNG, 1998).

Accordingly, the WCS aims to enable students to gain the necessary knowledge and competence to address the social challenges as they are, for example, articulated by the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2016) or the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) Initiative (HAERTLE, PARKES, MURRAY & HAYES, 2017).

Self-Education: Self-organized Learning by Student Initiatives

The principal activities of the initiatives are related to one or more of the themes of sustainable development, development cooperation, business ethics, educational justice, human rights, or global and intercultural learning. The following examples will give a brief insight into the different activities of selected initiatives.

Detailed information on these examples as well as an exemplary listing of all educational activities of the member initiatives from the winter semester 15/16 can be found in the Impact Report 2013-2016 in the annex (WORLD CITIZEN SCHOOL, 2016).

Example 1: UN University Group Tübingen

The initiative organizes weekly lectures on a jointly agreed semester topic in the context of the work of the UN. These are held by own members or by external students or lecturers. Once a year, the group organizes the international Tübingen International Crises Simulation, to which international students from the global network of the UN travel and dedicate themselves to the work and challenges of the UN within the framework of a role play.

(See for details: <http://tics-conference.org/>)

Example 2: Rethinking Economics Tübingen

The group belongs to the International Student Movement for Pluralism in Economics. In Tübingen, she regularly organizes lectures series to offer her fellow students alternative theoretical and methodological approaches to economics. In addition, the group organized the 1st international conference of the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics to which students from over 20 countries arrived. (See for details: <http://www.isipe.net>)

Example 3: Greening the University Tübingen

The group has been working for sustainable development at the university for about 10 years. The group organized in 2009 the study Oecologicum, an alternative study program. While this was initially organized and funded by the group, it has now been funded by public funds for several years and is an integral part of the university's program of study.

(See for details: <http://www.greening-the-university.de>)

Example 4: Arbeiterkind.de (Workers' Children) Tübingen

The group is committed to facilitating access to university through mentoring programs for children of parents who did not attend university. In 2017, the group carried out an empirical study at the university, not least acquiring methodological knowledge from empirical social research.

(See for details: <https://netzwerk.arbeiterkind.de>)

Example 5: Cooperative Activities and Peer Learning between WCS Members

It is common for member initiatives to exploit synergies and cooperate in workshops or invite students from other initiatives, for example for short presentations in their own initiative. One of the more visible collaborative projects is the so-called "Education Weeks", in which different initiatives come together and offer different workshops and activities during the week, sometimes in cooperation. The "Human rights week" and a "World climate week" followed the first "Week of Links – Week for Sustainable Development" in 2014.

<http://worldcitizen.school/curriculum-change/>

Course Program: Project-based Learning

The course program is aimed at individual students as well as initiatives. Project-based and experience-based learning are in the didactic focus of the program. It follows two streams.

Stream 1: Social Innovation supports participants developing a new project idea or a social enterprise. In two-day Social Innovation Camp and by personal project coaching students to learn how to conceptualize their own ideas.

Stream 2: Impact Management supports participants from existing project teams, initiatives. In five workshops about communication, project management, impact reporting, stakeholder management and fundraising students learn about real organizational challenges. A special feature of the course is that it is organized by selected students.

In both streams, project teams and single students are led and supported in their learning processes by experienced practitioners and lecturers of management and social entrepreneurship.

Network: Cooperative & transdisciplinary learning environment

The main features of the network are the moderation and the interdisciplinarity. The regular moderation of networking events and the serving of online networking tools are important instruments to govern the transdisciplinary learning space. All member initiatives whose single membership structures are usually interdisciplinary and university partners together build the transdisciplinary network. Needs and interests, as well as cooperation are explored in regular networking events.

University partners are the Career Service, which also provides the recognition of volunteering by credit points, the Center for Didactics, the Foreign Language Center, the Competence Center for Sustainable Development, and the Center for International & European Studies.

Student (Self-)administration, Editorial Structures, & Capacity Building

The WCS established a so-called “social reporting program” for selected students. It runs for the duration of one year and is designed to learn the basics of communications and management. Students learn to communicate about the activities of member initiatives as well as news by website, social media and newsletter.

3 Knowledge Transfer

Looking back at the four-year development process, some aspects of the WCS appear to have the potential to be implemented at other universities.

The documentation of all WCS activities from 2013–2017 serves as the basis for the following results, which are described as transferable. The results regarding self-organized learning in initiatives are based on a first survey of the activities of member initiatives and in the form of the single case studies presented in Chapter 2. The structure of that chapter follows top-down the stages of the WCS model presented in Fig.1.

Self-organized learning of student initiatives and network effects

To strengthen our knowledge about the potential of student initiative’s self-education, we conducted a study of the activities of 15 member initiatives in the winter term of 2015/16. In total, we recorded 280 events through interviews, questionnaires, and internet searches. The preliminary evaluation showed, that 60% of all events were informal working meetings, which are mostly used to discuss, reflect and plan activities. 29% of the events had the character of formal education like seminars, workshops, lectures series, or conferences. 22% of these educational events were offered to the public and treated mostly the initiatives’ principal topics. 7% were offered only to group members and considered mostly organizational or personal development issues. The remaining 11 % were events of general infor-

mation about the initiatives, recruiting events for new members, fundraising activities, stands at fairs, or had a socializing character.

As shown above, student initiatives as “open educational initiatives” (DÜRNBERGER, HOFHUES & SPORER, 2011) show potential for university teaching. Usually, the educational engagement is distinguished by a particular social and up-to-date relevance of the topics covered. It can have innovative and transformative character for research, teaching, and study structures as shown by the single cases in Chapter 2. The educational engagement is a suitable extracurricular complement to the university education offering, which is characterized by both project-based and self-determined learning. It offers the possibility, as successfully practiced at the University of Tübingen, to integrate it into the curriculum in the field of further qualifications. About a fifth of the current WCS member initiatives accept the curricular offer from the university.

Furthermore, the moderation of the WCS network shows effects in terms of a significant increase in cooperative activities, for example, by workshops, seminars, mutual presentations on the main topic of each initiative, or imitation effects by sharing of solutions for common organizational challenges. The cooperation and imitation effects are, for example, particularly clear through the jointly organized and designed thematic weeks by different initiatives as mentioned in *Chapter 2 Example 5*.

Course program: What works, what does not?

In the following, a distinction is made between initiatives, which usually have a lifetime of more than one generation (established initiatives) and those that are in the start-up phase and less than one generation old (startup initiatives).

Addressing Startup Initiatives (Stream 1)

The *Stream 1: Social innovation* is suitable to address entirely new initiatives and initiatives that are still shaped by the founding generation. In younger initiatives that are still at an early stage of development, the motivation to participate in the workshop offers tends to be higher than for established initiatives.

Addressing Established Initiatives (Stream 2)

In order to address the established initiatives, *Stream 2: Impact management* was developed and has been implemented in a pilot project. Under certain circumstances (see Chapter 4) established Initiatives can be successfully addressed.

Addressing all Initiatives with Project Coaching

Project coaching is a suitable way to counteract the often informal and spontaneous character of both established and startup initiatives with flexibility. Both in the context of formal course offerings and within the informal network structures, students express themselves positively to the coaching. Important or interesting information can be fed back into the network by the coaches and strengthens the network cohesion.

Organization of workshops by recruited students

In a pilot project recruited students organized several workshops themselves. They received credit points, project responsibility, and a budget for the implementation. The candidates learned about project management through searching for lecturers, preparing course material, conducting the didactic design, and performing professional follow-ups. Throughout the process, experienced lecturers were available to the students. The approach appears to be a promising concept for other course designs despite the high organizational effort and the relatively high personnel costs compared to conventional courses.

Construction of network structures

When addressing potential member initiatives to build the network, we were looking for initiatives that create value for society. This approach led to a process of self-selection that can be subsumed gradually into the mentioned WCS main themes. In a course of a German lecture period, the organization of three monthly exclusive networking meetings for members and a summer or winter party ensures members commitment.

Organizational and editorial structures

The WCS model creates an organizational memory over time, which allows following student generations to build on previous knowledge. A central calendar where all activities and events of member initiatives are collected and communicated to the public is a useful tool. Furthermore, the establishment of a newsletter, a social media channel and simple video clips are suitable to keep the network and the public informed.

4 Reflections

The WCS model is about what committed students make of their freedom and opportunities in the context of university life itself. It is about the key question of how students can learn to learn what they want to learn. The bottom-up integration of student initiatives in the WCS model systematically directs the gaze to this process level. The WCS model generally offers a change of perspective and development potential as a supplement to and improvement on classical higher education.

The work with the initiatives has made it clear that voluntary commitment follows its own logic and that the project work of volunteers cannot necessarily be supported by classical course didactics.

Although we organized numerous workshops which were tailor-made at the request of the established initiatives themselves, these were not accepted as expected by them in their role as “normal” participants. The reasons for this included a lack of time, budget, and the divergence of the specific needs and the timing of the offer.

At the same time, however, it was easy to involve established initiatives in their role as practice partners and to discuss their concrete challenges with the “normal” participants.

Our assumption that established initiatives take part in courses on *Stream 1: Social Innovation* in order to systematically design and implement new project ideas has not yet been strongly confirmed. The reasons for this could be the generally short-

term activities of established initiatives, which are usually only about implementing a project in a unique manner and in as little time as possible. Another reason could be that the influence of a “founder generation” or students with a corresponding entrepreneurial attitude is not part of the initiatives (anymore). Further empirical findings are needed.

If we try to look into the future of WCS, interesting and possible development paths can be identified. One of these could be the increased promotion of democratic competences through the additional involvement of political university groups. Also, the teaching of research skills could be a driver for Participatory Research and Citizen Science. Finally, the model also offers the possibility to create an even stronger link to society, for example through the explicit involvement of civil society, or political or economic actors in the context of service learning.

However, WCSs’ greatest potential for higher education is presumably because by looking at self-organized and self-determined learning and the interdisciplinary network, new spaces of thought and opportunity are created, which can be also used to supplement conventional service learning and to implement new didactic concepts in the different subject disciplines.

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Author



Michael WIHLEND A || Universität Tübingen, Weltethos-Institut ||
Hintere Grabenstraße 26, D-72070 Tübingen

www.worldcitizen.school

wihlenda@worldcitizen.school