



## Education and perfect times to learn

*Harald Kleem*

My name is Harald Kleem. I am 64 years old, married, with a daughter and I live in a community of 3 families in a house in the countryside in Germany.

My working life has been dotted with interventions within various and several issues, many regions and institutes; but at the core of it has been learning and change. I've run lots of campaigns, projects, NGO-work, in partnerships across countries. I worked with UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), for the Ministry of Education, Germany and other international organizations. My very old mother sometimes asked me: "Why are you doing all that? Who inspired you?" Maybe you will find answers in the following snippets from my life.

I was born as the third child of a middle class family in 1954, in a small town with a progressive university, called Marburg. My parents had some books, travelled to the mountains, and survived the war. Kindergarden and Primary schools were good and I got the chance to go to 'Gymnasium', a school for students with a privileged future. I liked music and started to play the drums at the end of the 60s: Pop, Rock — nothing for my parents and their tastes. They made a pact with me: maintain your standards at school, and then you'd be allowed to make that kind of 'noise'. So they gave me the freedom to try out different things, which gave me the motivation to learn — even things that weren't very attractive.

To supplement the family income, my parents hosted students from France, Sweden and Iran. This was my first exposure to 'foreigners' and the larger realm out there and began my natural initiation to a global world and existence.

In the last 3 years at school, the German friends I had were a group of creative, crazy, border-liners who followed the political

ideas of that time. They influenced me personally as well as the life of the university in my town Marburg (50000 locals, 30000 students). Young people were very political at that time. In 1970 I had a teacher who gave me 'space' and encouraged me to read literature, to love arts and experiment with everything. He stimulated my thinking and thought process. We finished school — the school of the establishment, as we called it then.

In 1972 I started university training to be a teacher. The faculty, called 'visual communication' was under construction and needed a student's representative. I took the opportunity and assisted in creating a curriculum for new students, which gave me the freedom to define what to learn: we added more space for researches on effects of media consumption and on manipulation by mass media; we cancelled lectures on arts and added space for political design.

In 1976 I started as a trainee teacher, after passing another exam, in a new school, somewhere in the countryside. I was not much older than the students there. Apart from regular classes I began to open my classroom to assist young students in need of special attention to help them cope with studies. I got very good feedback for that. Meeting both in public places and at school, our interactions attested to the fact that they had met a good friend and not a teacher. This experience enabled us to see school differently: I saw the struggles of those who faced learning difficulties and assisted them with small interventions. I talked with their parents to understand better why they struggled at school and tried to ensure their home situation supported their learning at school.

In 1978 I moved to another federal state and started to work as a regular teacher — interrupted by a civil service (instead of the army) in a youth center for nearly 2 years and there I could enrich my previous experiences of working with under privileged young people, in and out of school. At school we were many young teachers and we worked in teams to learn, teach and upgrade our knowledge about various aspects of the world. During a research on the Third World (now the 'developing' countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.) problems, I met Brazilians and started an NGO (Non-governmental Organisation), supporting social projects in Brazil. We also started the 'Kulturwerkstatt'— a program with international artists offering concerts and workshops. I also met representatives from several schools at an UNESCO-network (Associated School Projects-ASP) and my school got the title 'member in the ASP



Project-tour with Harald Kleem, Learn2Change-Summer Academy, Germany, June 2015

network', in which I later became the federal coordinator for the state of Lower Saxony in 1990.

In that role I motivated schools and the UNESCO-network to assist schools destroyed in the Balkan wars in Bosnia and Croatia. We conducted lots of seminars there in order to uplift disheartened teachers and encourage German schools to partner with those schools.

All along, my work with Brazil continued. We received information about poverty, violence, drugs, social and ecological disasters in Brazil and that drove us to support friends in a youth project in the mountains not far from Rio de Janeiro. After 10 years of supporting Brazilian social projects and learning, I travelled there in 1995 because we'd adopted a child from there. We encountered a completely different country than I had imagined — big and prosperous cities, a middle class, a functioning infrastructure etc. We were completely blind to that side of Brazil. We only asked for the problems and disasters it was faced with and our friends there gave us this account because it brought in donations from Germany.

I invited friends to experience the same in seminars with Brazilians, sometimes in Brazil and sometimes in Germany. I gave reports to my students, who wanted to travel too.

Meanwhile, I left my old school because I realized that even though I'd added lots of extra-activities in that school, the core of the school was still the same: 15 different subjects, 45 minutes per lesson, 6 lessons a day. They'd divide the world within those subjects with four to five thousand different topics and a child had to recombine those fragments to get an idea of the world. There was no time for questions, curiosity, for interdisciplinary projects, for acting, learning with the hand and heart.

Primary school years still are better, but secondary school kills childhood. The result is that those with vivid peer-groups outside of school and/or with a stable social background stays curious and active, while others feel alienated. Both groups ultimately 'emigrate' with their brain. School produces certificates but no skills.

In 1997 I started with a team to build a 'new' school in a village nearby, in a community, with the community. We included our Brazilian friends and other contacts, and started a student's exchange program with very young ones: 11–13 year old students. We called the meetings 'millennium villages', which were supported by artists.

But again the school—the new one—was not able to capitalize on the great experiences of the youngsters and the energies of the students returning from international meetings. At the same time we tried to link all institutions working with and for children, creating a regional network. I was able to use my gathered experiences and contacts and I learnt a lot: how to build a 'landscape of learning', following the African saying: 'To raise a child you need the whole village'. It was a great idea, but the formal schools were not ready to open the doors for cooperation. They were not aware that they do not have a monopoly on or for learning. A child between 1 and 16 years spends only 10% of its waking hours at school! The institutes were not prepared, however, to acknowledge and include other partners and new topics. There was no time, no space and mostly no teacher was interested to change his/her role from teaching to facilitating.

In 2005 we founded another NGO, called 'Future Life' in order to work on the idea of inclusive work—a network of persons, ideas and institutions.

Another NGO called 'MIRANTAO' extended its cooperation to Bosnia and South Africa; the cooperation with South Africa was an idea of our Brazilian partners, who wanted to know more about their African roots. To cooperate with Bosnia was an idea born in 1997

because of the Balkan war and the need to assist such countries to restart a tolerant and peaceful life and to support returning refugee children.

We have, since 1999, in South Africa, explored the idea of peer-leadership and adopted the idea of 'using' the energy of young students to share experiences and lead others to start change projects: on poverty, justice, conflicts and climate. Peer-leader-international was born.

Until July 2017 I was at school teaching under privileged children in the old, established style but supplanting it with the allied networks, integrating them within the projects of the two NGOs. In the last two years I've had a class with refugees from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan.

In 2017 I left the governmental institutions.

The school and schooling system did not change, but I changed permanently: I learnt to listen, to act, to evaluate, to change direction and discover new worlds (social groups, countries, cultures, situations). I still have the drive to change education. For 15 years I was in the Ministry for Education of Lower Saxony running projects/experiments on Global Learning and I'm still closely engaged with innovative projects in the German Ministry of Development and International Cooperation. We are supporting ideas of 'Learn2Change'; have expanded peer-leader-international, and have influenced political concepts of international partnership.

Since I began teaching formally, I've been an active part of our teacher's trade union. I've been an active member of the 'Greens', a political party in Germany for 30 years. I was working in local parliaments and I was a candidate for the National Parliament twice.

Looking back, I was lucky to have so many 'windows' to learn what I was interested in, to learn what was necessary to learn, to learn what others thought about and learnt about how they live. I have not been successful in changing the school system yet, but perhaps they must discover the prospects themselves. Perhaps you cannot force change at the school from the outside. Maybe you just have to offer space and time to learn. For me though, this process of trying new things, methods and interactions turned out to be lessons for life, as well as for my students. So my story is the story of 'transparent and open windows to different worlds'. A story of opportunities and of seizing these opportunities and taking initiative.

Coming back to my mother's question: I learnt the basics from my parents, who were part of a generation, that had to learn hard lessons: poverty, holocaust, war, the partition of the country in two parts, reunification, migration and digitalization. They learnt to handle it; they were always ready and open to pushing the reset button. My global mentality grew out from the many people I met along the way. I was always encouraged to be part of or influence change. The spice I got in an overdose was *curiosity*. But honestly, even today I don't know what is the best way to change conditions effectively but what I do know is; how to learn, how to teach, how to encourage young people — give them space, be a facilitator not a teacher. Trust in their *curiosity*.

German dramatist, Berthold Brecht in his famous *Stories of Mr. Keuner* (fictionalized comments on politics, everyday life, and exile), in the section 'Hardships of the best' leaves us with a wisdom that has been my maxim for work and life:

"What are you working on?" Mr. K. was asked. Mr. K. replied: "I'm having a hard time; I'm preparing my next mistake."

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Harald Kleem* is 64 years old, married and has a child. He lives in a community with another 2 families. He studied to be a teacher (subjects: Arts and German). He worked in two different schools and part time in teacher trainings and as a coordinator for projects of the Ministry for Education in Lower Saxony, Germany. He is an active trade unionist, green politician and founder of two NGOs.