

Dalia Alayassa (AQB)

Case Study: The Debate Coaching Program

Documenting Work on Your Project

- Why did you start the project?

When I was in high school, I had to run every Thursday after the last class and head to another school in the city to be part of their debate club. I improved in debate quickly and in a few months, I was one of the top debaters at that school's team. That's why that summer, I was chosen to represent that school alongside 4 other students at 2 international competitions. At one of these competitions, I placed 9th overall among the best speakers. These 2 international events opened my eyes to a whole new world of opportunities and amazing possibilities for growth. My English language skills were improving in no time, my school grades shifted from B+ to A+, I started creating friendships with people from various geographical areas, and created global connections that later on helped me obtain opportunities during my college career. I felt I was doing things and going places that a lot of the girls in my school were not feeling empowered to do, and therefore felt it was my duty to go back to the community I came from and serve them with the best resource I could passionately provide: debate.

A lot of my enthusiasm was coming from the fact that I was going to work with girls who were 14-16 years old. I really care about women's issues as I know being female is already difficult even if you are not saying or doing anything that goes against traditions because some traditions are designed to work against women. This meant that it was going to be much more difficult for you than for a man if you chose to be a debater. Being a knowledgeable, compassionate, and opinionated woman means you should not fear to speak in public, that you can address the public well, you are full of confidence, and in love with your mind and body. That is when I decided that a huge part of my service project would be to bring women's issues to the table through debate. For example, we had discussions then debates about feminism, equality, sexual harassment, and would empower the schoolgirls we worked with through our project.

I often get asked what is the problem that your project solves? To be honest, I do not think there is one answer to this question. This project is not an environmental project where the problem can be lack of green practices at college, or picking up trash; It is more of a broad project because it is educational so it touches upon many aspects. For me, I am trying to make the debate program a casual activity in Palestinian schools because we rarely see schools here that use debate as a teaching method or as an extracurricular activity. Additionally, I also wanted to empower the students, especially the women that I work with. But in reality, the project provides several skills for participants' future endeavors. These girls are learning skills that will help them manage their lives better in both academic and personal ways. Creating opportunities for this kind of personal development is at the core of the project. Personal development is the deeper aim I want to achieve, and I wish to see a future where these girls feel capable of responding to sexism in their own special way. I wish to see a future where these girls choose to dream big because they have gained confidence and choose to make braver choices. Through this project, I hope to see these young girls become the strong women I see within them; intelligent, brave, active in society, and confident.

In the academic year 2017-2018, I ran the project by myself and gave weekly debate sessions in place of English classes for 9th and 10th graders. This year I am working with a volunteer (Tala Salem) and we are giving weekly debate sessions after school for 9th, 10th and 11th graders.

During the summer, June 20-27, 2018. I decided to hold a summer camp for debate at their school in order to keep the girls interested in the debate project during the 3-month vacation.

After a lot of negotiations with the school and several meetings, the school finally allowed us to hold the summer camp, but we had to give up some activities. For example, I wanted to have a closing ceremony on the last day in which we could invite parents to watch the girls debate, but the school refused.

Team Recruitment

I posted about the summer camp and sent emails to several people that I thought would make good volunteers. By the time the program started, I had originally recruited seven volunteers, but two apologized and had to withdraw.

During the summer camp, students were asked to group themselves either with the beginner's group or with the advanced group. Three volunteers worked with the beginner's group (Ramez Hayek, Tala Salem, Nora Marzoqa), and the rest worked with the advanced group (Rahaf Salahat, Afnan Abbasi). I chose to be in charge of the of organizing and supervising rather than to coach during the program. I believe this was a smart choice because, for potentially complicated programs like this, one person should always be free to do organizing work. For instance, I had calls to make, things to purchase, emergencies to handle, and more. This way, the volunteers could focus on coaching and do their planning effectively and efficiently.

- How do you expect your project to exist after you are no longer involved?

I am already considering how I can pass this project along to a new generation of students. First I will try to identify what kind of students might be interested (students from the debate club/current volunteers/or students interested in starting projects), then I will advertise that the project will be transferred to new students and I will hold meetings with those who show interest. From those meetings, I make a decision on who would be best suited to oversee the project in the future. I believe that for these students to be able to run the project successfully after I leave, I will need to create a solid foundation for them to stand on.

Growth and Sustainability

What is good about this project is that its sustainability does not depend on its structure but on the volunteers' willingness to keep going every week and to maintain strong connections with the school. Essentially, as long as the volunteers are going and doing their job, the schools are very welcoming. Therefore, the structure of the project is simple enough to be self-sustained through ongoing goodwill and flexible enough to fit the needs of the volunteers and coordinators for each year.

Signs of Success

The answer to this depends on the definition of success... for me, success is making small changes in the students' lives. An example is that recently, one girl approached me and said, "I want to thank you, I never spoke in public but last week I had a presentation and I remember what you told us. I stood in confidence and I got the highest grade on the presentation." The student had an enjoyable experience that translated into personal growth which had a positive impact on their academics. It's moments like this that show me the project is a success. I have also been distributing surveys asking students to evaluate the project and their evaluations were very positive. I hope to use this feedback to continue improving the program in future years.

Advertisement

Before the 2018 Get Engaged Conference, I did not think that social media was of any use, but after a session with some women who are experts in advertising through social media, I started to use different platforms to advertise for my project. I used my personal social media to advertise anyways, but I now mainly rely on the project Facebook page that I created after the conference. I have also created a special email and Youtube channel for the project that I often

use, too. I also use face-to-face interaction to reach people in my community. For example, I make announcements about upcoming events during debate club meetings or to students during common hour. I have also reached out to the Al-Quds University community by giving sessions for the university students every Tuesday. From these efforts, I now have two potential volunteers that can help with the project next semester.