TRACKING NEW EUROPEAN WAYS?
INTERNATIONAL PATHS FOR LEARNING[1]

Eunice Macedo, MA[2]

Porto University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences
Centre for Educational Research and Intervention
Rua Manuel Pereira da Silva – 4200-392 Porto – Portugal
Tel. No.: 00351 226079700
Fax: 351 226079725
E-mail: eunicemacedo_58@hotmail.com

Abstract

The opportunity for this analysis was provided by the experience of an ERASMUS intensive programme, which gathered students and teachers from diverse subject areas: social work, educational sciences, and social policies. The programme was aimed at discussing social policy and legal and social Services in the European countries involved: Belgium, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Portugal. Therefore, this paper builds on the processes of learning, having been developed with an international group of twenty higher education students, aims to bring into evidence the role of learning—teaching methodologies, not only to implement meaningful conceptual learning but also to provide students and teachers with significant learning experiences, where values of multiculturalism, solidarity and recognition are at stake.

Keywords: learning-teaching methodologies, intercultural communication, learning experiences

Introduction

Recent studies about higher education have raised the concern about the lack of pedagogy at this study level (Kember and Kam-Por, 2000; Fink, 2003). The possible impacts of the teaching-learning methodologies in student learning and in their future capacity to deal with a world embedded in complexity, risk, unpredictability and continuous rapid change, have been questioned as well (Macedo, 2009; Chappell, et al., 2003). Such and other lines of scholarly discussion take into account the fact that young adults will be asked to be flexible, innovative and able to interact, as well as emphasizing the current focus in the development of skills such as self management, self-evaluation, and so forth. These lines of research also underline the values of multiculturalism, solidarity and recognition, which may be lost in this process, where the ideas of competitiveness and individualism seem to be at stake *(Antunes, 2008; Macedo, 2009).*

Coetaneously Europe has been concentrating efforts to develop a so-called, *learning Europe*, a *Europe of knowledge*, where the implementation of educational cooperation programmes among member states acts as an important policy to accomplish these objectives. As a matter of fact, the European Commission (EC) has integrated its various educational and training initiatives under a sin-

gle umbrella—the Lifelong Learning Programme, for 2007 to 2013—that stands as a "European strategy and co-operation in education and training." As asserted by the EC this learning programme is aimed at enabling individuals at all stages of their lives to pursue stimulating learning opportunities across Europe. The Erasmus sub-programme, especially aimed at higher education, shelters the Waspolls Intensive programme that gave room to this article[1]. As referred to by the EC, this strategy for education and training stands on the recognition by "politicians at the European level ... that education and training are essential to the development of today's knowledge society and economy. The EU's strategy emphasises countries working together and learning from each other." These policies have been largely implemented since the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 and focus "on growth and jobs. The strategy recognized that knowledge, and the innovation it sparks, are the EU's most valuable assets, particularly in light of increasing global competition." Therefore, to bring about an intensive course within this educational/political context, surely brought a great deal of challenges both for teachers and for students, as it involved serious social responsibility (Wildemeersch, Finger and Jansen, 2000). The group was constituted by degree students from four different countries, varied cultures and scientific backgrounds, and by their respective tutors, who also had to open themselves to the experience to learn to teach in different ways (Ramsden, 1992). Not only was there a need to deal with the students' and teachers' high level of diversity, but a compromise had been assumed to cover a lot of topic work in a short period of time. The main question was how to make the experience meaningful to the group and to each individual. This had to be achieved, in spite of, or especially because each person brought different experiences, diverse perspectives about reality and human relations, various expectancies towards the course and dissimilar views about the learning-teaching processes that added value to the programme's experience. That was why the planning and development of the learning pathway assumed large relevance, as we will try to clarify in the next sections.

Building Learning

1. Course planning and preparatory work

When defining the course objectives, values, and methods, the team had to take into account changes that have occurred in the scope of science and technologies, art and leisure (Ibañez, 2006) that affect the ways people inhabit today's world. This means that the team considered worldwide and specific particular changes that have been enacted in the spheres of knowledge and research. These were taken as pillars that formed a process of education that was designed to contribute towards a society of knowledge, up to date with principles of solidarity, multiculturalism and mutual recognition. Hence the team was concerned about the course curricular design, in terms of the contents, experiences and ethical values that would concurrently provide for the attainment of global and multicultural objectives (Ibañez).

Aware of the current educational/political agenda and human field, and rooted on the assumptions described above, teachers were involved in dialogic preparatory work, which lead to careful planning of the work sessions and of the moments of leisure to be developed and enjoyed with the coming group of students. The team took into account the need to explore all challenges in a positive way, and to deal with any difficulties which might arouse from the differences referred above. The option for a variety of teaching-learning approaches arose as the most adequate to deal with such, and to turn it into a significant learning experience (Fink, 2003). It took into account the need for a balance between the courses' ambitious objectives, in terms of curricula, characteristics of the teachers and young adults, as well as the knowledge that was to be shared and the quantity and quality of knowledge that students brought and were requested to produce. Therefore learning-teaching strategies were planned to be used in large international group, which was aimed at crisscrossing a variety of subjects, interests and experiences; others were planned for an international specialized group, according to the choice of the study subtopic; and small national group work was to be developed every now and then in order to help students to reinforce and to deepen the understanding of the contents and of the learning process, through the use of their own native language.

Keeping these concerns in mind, the learning pathway was initiated by preparatory work of teachers and students, which was developed in their home countries, according to a set of guidelines previously defined in order to grant a common framework for all students. Such work was supported by teachers from partner universities. It consisted of an individual essay about a specific subtopic (stu-

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[1] Other sub-programmes are Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci, and Grundtvig, each aimed at a different population. <http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc28_en.htm>.

dents could choose one out of four) and of a common "national" paper that summarized the four sub-topics about each country. These pieces were aimed at helping students to be more aware of their own reality so that they would be able to present it and discuss it in an international context. Students' productions were shared on Moodle—a platform for e-learning—so that all students could read and comment on each others' work, learn from one another, and so that a certain sense of communality would begin to be built as well. Very specific skills were gained in this primary process, from the more technical (such as the use of Moodle), to the content (such as the knowledge about one countries' reality in a specific field), the self-development (such as the awareness of the capacity to learn with one another), to the meta-cognitive ones (such as the reflection about one ownlearning) and so forth. I will next concentrate on the course implementation, which raised the possibility to enlarge these and other skills.

2. Course implementation

During the course implementation the work that took place was aimed at developing a great deal of skills and capacities as well. It embodied a learning process which stood mainly on the value of the hands-on learning strategies, but where more traditional teaching strategies were brought to play as well, so each person could learn (Silver, et al., 2001), students and teachers included. In the reflective description that follows, we will try to emphasise the value of each strategy, their complementary character and the diverse roles assumed by students and teachers within the learning-teaching process. We will start by reflecting on intercultural communication work as a transversal umbrella that traced the mood for communication. I will then move from the analysis of teacher-centred work towards an analysis of student-centred work.

2.1. Intercultural communication workshops

The development of intercultural communication workshops emerged from and promoted team's interaction, mutual recognition, and cultural awareness as essential features for learning. Several sessions were thought of and prepared, aiming to unblock communication and build a sense of belonging, as well as to construct some principles of intercultural dialogue that could inform the inter-relational action. These ethics of communication were reinforced through the students' and teachers' direct involvement and experiences, and traced the mode for communication. Three crucial principles are to be emphasised:

i) The need to rethink *difference* as relational—difference is seen in its incommensurability— within this relational model *we are the difference* (Stoer and Magalhães, 2005). This means that the other is different and we are different as well, therefore difference exists within the relation among differences and unilateral action over the *other* is refused. On the contrary, people are given the possibility to work together, through common action and shared decision-making;

ii) The pertinence to assume the horizontal value of diverse cultures (Cortesão, 2001). This means that not only cultures have to face one another, but also that bridges are build in between cultures in such a way that a new, more valuable culture is built, one which overcomes the sum of cultures;

iii) The emphasis on listening and understanding others according to an approximation to their own terms and values (Young, 1997, 2002). This means that each and everyone is acknowledged, while the asymmetry of peoples' positions in diverse structures of power is recognised as well, due to the awareness that each one carries different stories, status, values and ways to interpret the world.

2.2. Cross national tutorial

Cross national tutorial work took an important part in the learning pathway, as well. It was aimed at deepening knowledge about the four subtopics of the project, according to the students' choice. This cross national work gave students the opportunity to discuss topics in small groups. It helped them build an understanding about countries' continuities and discontinuities, and embodied the preparatory work for the elaboration and organization of the final products of international groups. During these sessions students were challenged with some complex tasks in order to help develop higher levels of reasoning and communication. These consisted of making use of individual preparatory work developed in their home country, compare it with others, and analyse the reasons for similarities and differences among countries. In order to do this, students were asked to take into account the contri-

butions of lectures and seminars, which might enrich their analysis. Besides that, students had to choose and discuss one of three statements, which were provided with the goal to induce reflection, and include it in their approach to the subtopic. The final work was organized according to students' options and common decisions. The use of "Problem Based Learning" (Boud and Feletti, 1991; Chappell and Hager, 1995; Duch, Gron and Allen 2001), a strategy that builds on the identification of real problems, engaged students in deep and more elaborate reasoning about the topics as well as it enrolled them in meta-cognition about their learning process. This means that students were given the opportunity to produce substantial and meaningful knowledge while reinforcing bonds with one another at the same time. This occurred due to the more intimate character of tutorial sessions where the fact that people work in a small group about a specific topic of common interest helps both the shy and the extrovert students to develop. They first feel the security of the small group and are given an opportunity to express themselves; then they have a chance to learn, to step back, listen and value others more, whereas both exchange and develop knowledge.

2.3. Lectures and seminar discussions

Formal lectures were presented to students. During these sessions, each teacher shared his/her knowledge about specific topics and countries' realities, within his/her own speciality, through the use of a more conventional systematic teaching style. Teachers presented data and their analysis and students were requested to listen, concentrate and prepare some questions about issues that were raised. Within this teaching strategy, if on the one hand, students were treated as the *object* of the learning process, on the other, systematic information was provided. If it wasn't for the questions students were asked to provide, no feedback from students would have allowed teachers to be assured about their appropriation and understandings. *Seminar discussions* overcame this lacuna, giving room to more interactive dialogical processes within which students had the opportunity to take a more active role. Teachers' specific contributions were crossed with students questioning through debate in the international group. Within this process, the need to formulate questions and make comments, while being questioned by others in order to clarify the topics led students to make connections with own experience and knowledge. Therefore a higher level of thought was implemented through interaction and, moreover, students had the possibility to assume their rightful role as *subjects* of the learning process.

2.4. Final "products"

As a result, each international group produced a written essay that consisted of a comparative study about the four countries, and prepared a final oral presentation that concerned their chosen topic. Later on, common papers were put on Moodle in order to be available to others. The oral presentation given by the international small group to the large group gave students the possibility to present their data in a more or less creative way, according to the group's choice, whilst giving them the chance to practice team work, dialogue, interaction, negotiation, decision-making, expressing and being heard, listening, and public presentation skills. Besides this, all the visible products of the students' work together with their teachers' reflective contributions were organized later on in a handbook that was put on Moodle and sent to several institutions as part of the course dissemination.

2.5. Field work and cultural visits

Field work was organized as well, with two main purposes: i) to build students' awareness about Portuguese policy in what concerned their subtopics, and ii) to give students a broader view of some inclusion policies developed in Portugal to diminish school dropouts and promote students' educational and social success. In order to accomplish the first objective, small international groups of students were accompanied by a tutor to specific institutions that dealt with specific issues. To accomplish the second, a trip was organized to a secondary professional school[1] in Portugal's northern part, which focused on students' work insertion while building strong relations with the local community.

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[1] The school referred to is "Escola Profissional de Agricultura do Marco de Canaveses," whose students and teaching and non teaching staff we congratulate and thank for the good work and friendly welcome during our visit.

Students spent a whole day in this school and had contact with individual practical projects of secondary school students.

Informal cultural visits around Porto and to an ancient Roman city in the north complemented the induction work. It gave students the opportunity to be more aware of Portuguese social reality, cultural habits; ways of communication and attitudes, as well as providing them with some knowledge about Portuguese history and past.

2.6. Evaluation

The whole learning process was closely followed by the teachers' team. Processes of students' formative continuous evaluation were developed in order to reinforce positive features and abandon less positive ones. Teaching and teaching processes were assessed and discussed in teachers' periodic meetings, which allowed for the reinforcement of the courses' implementation as well as allowing teachers to develop team work strategies and modes of cooperation. Summative evaluation was developed together with this and included whole aspects of the learning process, since its beginning with students' individual production till its end with common international presentations and papers. Therefore, one may say that evaluation had a very important role in the whole process and rose as a "natural" dimension of the learning process.

Conclusions

I would like to finish by emphasizing a couple of ideas. First of all, one may say that good results arose as a "result" of a positive, reflective learning-teaching process, within which students and teachers assumed their rightful role of subjects of the learning process, as teaching-learners and learning-teachers. Within this process, particular attention was given to the multicultural character of the group where the principles of solidarity and recognition were reinforced while put into action, underlining the human, most valuable dimension of the teaching-learning process.

The opportunities to mingle, laugh and have fun were not neglected either, not only during informal external visits and common leisure, but during the whole learning process, where intimacy and complicity were put into action as strong tools to promote learning. This was embodied in informal horizontal relational modes that helped communication and the development of significant experiences and meaningful and substantial knowledge, as it provided room for group and individual fulfilment and a positive sense of achievement.

Besides this, students and teachers' diversity proved to be an enriching and profitable issue of this learning settlement, which provided for the development of *enlarged thought*. Therefore, one may say that this experience illustrates that there is no need for a divorce between learning and the pleasure of doing so (Macedo, 2004) at a higher education level. On the contrary, learning and having fun can embody a cheerful and rentable relationship where recognition and solidarity are at stake.

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NAUJŲ EUROPOS KELIŲ PAIEŠKA? TARPTAUTINĖ MOKYMOSI PATIRTIS

Eunice Macedo, MA
Porto universitetas

Santrauka

Parengti šį straipsnį paskatino patirtis, įgyta dalyvaujant Erasmus intensyvioje programoje. Ten susirinko studentai ir dėstytojai, atstovaujantys įvairioms mokslo sritims: socialiniam darbui, edukologijai ir socialinei politikai. Programos tikslas buvo išanalizuoti socialinę politiką, teisines ir socialines paslaugas skirtingose Europos šalyse: Belgijoje, Olandijoje, Lietuvoje ir Portugalijoje. Taigi šio straipsnio, kuris remiasi tarptautinės dvidešimties studentų grupės mokymosi patirtimi, tikslas – atskleisti mokymosi ir mokymo metodų vaidmenį, įgyvendinant konceptualų mokymąsi, pabrėžiantį daugiakultūres, solidarumo ir pripažinimo vertybes.

Straipsnis pradedamas teoriškai apibūdinant mokymosi patirtį. Toliau dėmesys sutelkiamas į papildomus aspektus, kurie buvo sujungti siekiant konstruoti mokymąsi. Kaip ir bet kuris kitas socialinis įvykis, kuriame dalyvauja žmonės, mokymasis reikalauja gero pasirengimo. Štai kodėl mes sutelkiame dėmesį į *planavimo* bei *parengiamuosius darbus*, kuriais užsiima dėstytojai ir studentai. Mes užsibrėžėme aptarti studijų dalyko įgyvendinimą, pabrėžiant jo aktyvų[1] (angl. *hands-on-learning*) mokymosi pobūdį bei mokymosi strategijų įvairovės užtikrinimą.

Tai yra akivaizdus pavyzdys begalinių galimybių, kurios gali atsiverti mokymuisi pasitelkiant naujoviškas strategijas. Mes teigiame, kad strategijos bus kokybiškesnės, jei jos bus kuriamos pasitelkiant mokytojų patirtį (angl. *brainstorming*) mokymo ir mokymosi aplinkoje, kurioje žmonės laisvai gali išreikšti savo mintis ir žino, kad jų balsas bus išgirstas ir į jį bus atsižvelgta.

Šis glaudaus bendraamžių bendradarbiavimas taip pat padės besimokantiems kurti ir siekti gilesnių žinių bei refleksyvumo, tai taip pat gali būti paskata studentams bendradarbiauti tarpusavy. Tuo metu, kai Europa yra susirūpinusi dėl studijų kokybės, mokymosi patirtis, pristatyta šiame straipsnyje, yra skirta parodyti, kad geresnis lavinimas įmanomas. Tai gali būti padaryta.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: mokymosi ir mokymo metodai, tarpkultūris bendradarbiavimas, mokymosi patirtis.

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[1] Studentai mokosi aktyviai, tiesiogiai manipuliuodami studijų objektu.