THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF LEARNING. SPECIFICITY OF WORKING WITH CULTURALLY DIVERSE GROUPS OF STUDENTS

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Abstract

The author emphasizes the importance and the impact of Lifelong Learning Programme Erasmus on higher education in case of creating multicultural classrooms in majority culture. Additionally, according to John W. Berry, four strategies of minority students functioning at host culture were introduced: assimilation, marginalisation, isolation and integration. They were presented to make teachers and students more aware about the problems which students, coming from minority culture, have to face while staying in the country with its majority culture. Next, the context of learning and the importance of intercultural education in multicultural classroom, were emphasized by the author, as enriching to: host, faculty and other students’ cultures. This indicates that the host culture is changed, developed and enriched because of the contacts with ‘otherness’.

KEY WORDS: socio-cultural context of learning, higher education, strategies of minority group functioning at host culture by J. Berry, intercultural education, Erasmus Programme.

Introduction

The environment and the context of learning is important because it is a space which surrounds students and has a great impact on their learning. Formal, informal and non-formal education takes place in environment that is immersed in socio-

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1 Formal learning takes place in education and training institutions, leading to recognised diplomas and qualifications. Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to formalised certificates. Non-formal learning may be provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations and groups (such as in youth organisations, trades unions and political parties). It can also be provided through organisations or services that have been set up to complement formal systems.
cultural context. If there are international students in the class, the context changes. This fact demands the adjustment of knowledge, skills and attitudes which will be developed in culturally diversified groups of students. It also requires evaluation of former teaching methods. Additionally, the teachers are expected to be innovative in developing the curriculum for culturally diverse classes. Definitely, teaching and learning in intercultural context is demanding. If it is demanding, it means that both, students and teachers will enrich by gaining new experience, but also they will develop themselves by facing and trying to accustom, understand the differences between them.

The aim of the article is to present the impact of Lifelong Learning Programme Erasmus, on learning environment, at the level of higher education in Europe. Moreover, four strategies of minority group functioning at host culture (assimilation, integration, isolation, marginalization) were presented, to indicate the mission of intercultural education in building integrated multicultural societies.

1. Culturally diversified classes – the Impact of Erasmus Programme on higher education

The aim of Erasmus Programme (EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is to develop international cooperation between the institutions of higher education mainly in European Union, but generally also in Europe. Programme is dedicated towards institutions of higher education, their teachers, administrative staff and students. Some of its actions enables mutual cooperation between the educational institutions and organisations from the business sector and entrepreneurs. Nowadays, it is indicated that the aims of Erasmus Programme are: to increase the level of students and teachers mobility, to develop mutual cooperation between the higher education institutions, to increase the transparency and compatibility of qualifications in higher education, to improve the quality and expand cooperation between universities and enterprises, to facilitate work on innovative practices and exchange of such practices and work on innovative materials, services, and practices based on ICT.

The Erasmus Programme was the outcome on the basis of experience gained in accomplishing of European Community supported pilot student exchange projects between 1981 and 1986, to promote mobility in higher education. As a result, the European Community Council of Ministers on 15th of June 1987 established

(such as arts, music and sports classes or private tutoring to prepare for examinations). Informal learning is a natural accompaniment to everyday life. Unlike formal and non-formal learning, informal learning is not necessarily intentional learning, and so may well not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills. Source: Commission of the European Communities, 2000.
the Erasmus Programme. From that moment we may distinguish three phases of the Programme, which depended on successive decisions of the bodies of European Community, and from 2009 of the European Union\(^2\).

1. **1987–1995** – Erasmus Programme was an individual European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. In this period Erasmus was not only confined to student exchange, but also facilitated mobility of academic staff, supported higher institutions cooperation activities e.g. joint development of curricula, intensive programmes. Furthermore, in this period Erasmus supported actions related to the recognition of study periods and qualifications.

2. **1995–2006** – Erasmus was incorporated into a wider European Community international cooperation Programme Socrates, which consists of eight components. It provided further support for student mobility, but also emphasised the teacher mobility, to bring European character and elements to the institutions of higher education.

3. **2007–2013** – it is a current phase, when Erasmus is a part of compound Lifelong Learning Programme\(^3\). Erasmus aims to support the development of the European Higher Education Area\(^4\).

The core element of Erasmus Programme is mobility which is stimulating by awarded grants for:

- **student mobility** – includes study periods at foreign partner universities holding the European University Charter (EUC) and practical placements in enterprises, training centres, research centres or other institutions. Grant-holders can additionally participate in mobility by attending Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILC), by going to countries where less widely known languages are spoken;
- **staff mobility** – including teaching assignments at foreign universities and staff mobility to undertake training in a foreign institution;
- **activities related to organisation of student and staff mobility**;

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\(^2\) After the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon into 2009 the pillar structure ceased to exist, abolishing the European Communities and that was the moment the legal personality of the European Union.

\(^3\) The European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme enables people at all stages of their lives to take part in stimulating learning experiences, as well as helping to develop the education and training sector across Europe.

\(^4\) The establishment of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was meant to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe to be reached by 2010. Between 1999–2010, all the efforts of the Bologna Process members were targeted to creating the EHEA.
• organisation of intensive programmes – short courses which are developed by partner higher education institutions and run by academic teachers in various countries for multinational groups of students from participating institutions\(^5\).

To summarise, Erasmus Programme supports students international mobility for gaining knowledge and to familiarize with new approaches towards learning and teaching methods. It also enables students to acquire new skills which they will need for free participation in multicultural European societies. Mobility enriches students identity and delivers new elements into it. Experience gained during mobility period may interact with students’ current attitudes and values and result in ‘expanding’ themselves.

More than 2.5 million students have experienced what it means to do an ERASMUS term in one of more than 4000 higher education institutions in 33 participating countries. These include all the EU Member States as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey\(^6\).

Many studies show that a period spent abroad not only enriches students’ lives in the academic and professional fields, but can also improve language learning, intercultural skills, self-reliance and self-awareness. Their experiences give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen\(^7\).

2. Strategies of minority group functioning at host culture

The specificity of current socio-cultural context in Europe, is the result of many global (e.g Americanism and the development of the internet), European (e.g. creating and extending European Union), national (regaining independence by a few European countries), and regional processes (e.g. tendencies for separating and promoting regions) which began in the past and are still being developed, transformed and extended. Certainly, one of the greatest impact of creating multicultural societies in Europe had the European Union within its political decisions, such as adopting in 1987 the Erasmus Programme by the European Commission or signing the Schengen Agreement in 1995 to create borderless Europe or by establishing free market in chosen European countries. As a result of immigration, many societies become culturally plural (Berry, 1997, p. 8). That is, people of different cultural background come to work, study and live together, and as a result they form diverse societies. The problem is, that in many cases immigrants form


\(^6\) [http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/students_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/students_en.htm) (27.05.2013).

\(^7\) [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/erasmus_en.htm#added](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/erasmus_en.htm#added) (27.05.2013).
cultural groups are not equal in numerical, economic or political matter. Many kinds of cultural groups may exist in plural societies and their variety is primarily due to three factors: voluntariness, mobility, and permanence. Some groups have entered into the acculturation process voluntarily (e.g. immigrants) while others experience acculturation without having sought it out (e.g. refugees, indigenous peoples). Other groups are in contact because they have migrated to a new location (e.g. immigrants and refugees), while others have had the new culture brought to them (e.g. indigenous peoples and “national minorities”). And third, among those who have migrated, some are relatively permanently settled into the process (e.g. immigrants), while for others the situation is a temporary one (e.g. sojourners such as international students and guest workers, or asylum seekers who may eventually be deported) (Berry, 1997, p. 8).

Despite the fact that international students are only temporally staying in new cultural environment they can also face one or more from the four strategies of functioning in host culture. Temporally, does not mean a few days or weeks, it means at least three months stretching over to one academic year. This article is devoted to the description and analyses of specificity of LLP-Erasmus students who have to function in the majority culture (host culture). John W. Berry describes four strategies and ways of functioning of minority groups with the context of a host culture.

![Fig. 1. Strategies of minority group functioning while having contact with host culture](source: own study; Berry, J. (2000). Acculturation et adaptation. In: J. Costa-Lascoux, M. A. Hilly, G. Vermes, Phralite des cultures et dynamiques identities. Paris, p. 5’68.)
The assimilation strategy is defined from the point of view of minority groups, when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek for current interaction and for being included in the host culture. In case of assimilation the non-dominant group tries to become similar to the host culture, simultaneously losing their cultural roots, traditions, customs, language etc. In contrast, when ‘minority group’ places a value on holding on to its original culture, and at the same time wishes to avoid interaction with others, who are the representatives of the dominant culture, the process is called the separation. When there is an interest in both maintaining one’s original culture, while having interactions with other groups, it is called the integration. In this case some elements of cultural integrity is maintained, within seeking to participate in larger social network of the host culture. Finally, when there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss), and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination) then the marginalisation is defined (Berry, 1997, p. 9). In my opinion, it would be ideal, if the LLP-Erasmus students get support from host culture (society, university, teachers, students etc) to have an opportunity to integrate with the majority. The reason for writing this article is to emphasize the need to create and conduct intercultural workshops to support ‘home’ and ‘host’ students. These workshops aim to integrate students from the minority culture with those from host country by encouraging them to learn the phenomenon of culture, be aware of its’ impact on people’s communication and behavior through teaching them English. Integration can only be ‘freely’ chosen and successfully pursued by non-dominant groups when the dominant society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity (Berry, 1991, p. 18). It shows the necessity for developing and organising intercultural trainings for the majority group, to prepare it for an optional contact with the representatives of other cultures. For international Erasmus students it is easier to integrate with the host culture, as they are coming to the exact university where international coordinators, teachers, mentors, administrative staff are waiting them. They are there to unable the students studying, familiarising with the environment, support and explain the cultural differences. Kenneth Cushner wrote that the “primary objective of school, success for all, (…) is rarely achieved because (…) institutions do not consider the cross-cultural context in which teaching and learning occur” (1990, p. 98). To achieve better results in students’ learning process it is necessary to consider their cultural background, but also to benefit from their cultural differences. Students, who follow lessons in culturally diverse class, can learn that there are many solutions and perspectives on the same problem or topic. They also learn that they should respect and tolerate other people and their opinion. In the process of learning they should also understand that different does not mean better or worse, it just means other than mine.
3. Context of learning in multicultural environment

Higher education institutions with international Erasmus students are areas where different cultures operate in the same environment. There is often a dominant ‘host culture’, both among the faculty and the students, and the culture of the host country can impinge on this university culture in varying degrees and ways. This will produce a higher education institution culture with individual and specific characteristics. Into this cultural space will come students of different cultural backgrounds and academic histories, bringing with them certain experiences, attitudes, expectations and preconceptions which constitute their own individual cultural characteristics. They will encounter the characteristics of the school culture, creating could be described as ‘cultural borderlands’ (Allan, 2002), where the students’ experience of the institution will take place. Cooperating at the same space of higher institution both, the international Erasmus and host students are affected by mutual influences. Host students have a great cultural, social and individual impact of international Erasmus students, but also Erasmus students influence the host students, teachers and faculty culture.

![Cultural borderlands – areas of cultural interaction](image)

All the contacts between the teachers and the students, both, national and international, take place in the field of host culture, within its tradition, customs, religion, symbols, values etc. It is also deeply set in history and political aspect of a leading country. “To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world, in broadly similar ways” (Hall, 1997, p. 2). International students, in a certain moment, join the ‘host culture’ and ‘school culture’. They have to learn it through observing, asking, reading, participating etc. Most of the students who they meet in different social environments will represent ‘majority student culture’. “The context of the school culture not only forms the frame that will define the situation and the students’ experiences, it is also a determinant factor in the process of cross-cultural interaction, students will interact with the school culture as much as with each other” (Al-lan, 2002, p. 3). This example illustrates the overlapping cultural environments of higher education institution which surround international Erasmus students. Being in the position of minority plays a crucial role in case of building ‘other student cultures’, ‘majority student culture’ and ‘school culture’. To some extent, hosting international students may change ‘host culture’ and cause the phenomenon called as ‘Internationalisation at Home’ (IaH), which J. Knight (2004, p. 20) pointed out as very important and it can be interpreted to be the creation of a culture or climate on campus that promotes and supports international/intercultural understanding and focuses on campus-based activities. IaH is a concept that constitutes the base for the international work at the university. The ambition is that all students shall get an international and intercultural dimension during their studies, i.e. broad-mindedness, maturity, understanding and respect for other people and their cultures etc. By starting international process “at home” there is also hope to encourage students to spend a part of their study time at a foreign partner university.

4. Importance of intercultural education in multicultural classroom

If multiculturalism is a rising social process and phenomenon then we, as teachers and educators have to prepare new education strategies and working methods, which will enable to create all necessary competences and cultural attitudes at local, regional and national, but also international as European and global level. Kitson Alexander Smith (2005, p. 25–26) has an idea of building interna-

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tional learning communities as a way of promoting equality and better understanding among people:

- the perception of foreign experience as adding value to not threatening a strong clear identity, this is early in the process;
- the development of empathy, the capacity to step into the shoes of different mentalities and cultures with relish and enjoyment, this is ongoing;
- the evolution of cultural equi-distance, this is later in the process and can be summarized as the ability to stand back from own point of view and see it as one of many possible stances and equal in value and relevance as others are.

Intercultural education refers to preparing individuals towards living in modern, liberal, intercultural, civil society. Students while mobility period participate in different cultural dimensions (of home and host country and native cultures of their international friends, etc.). They develop abilities to cooperate in multicultural environment, respect and acceptance for somebody’s otherness.

The main aims of intercultural education are (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, 2007, p. 38):

- preparing for having educational, professional, touristic contact in home country or abroad with people who were brought up in different countries;
- allowing stress-free involvement into life in another country or in own society changing under the influence of emigration processes;
- use of foreign languages in a way that will not wake the embarrassment and discomfort caused by the fact that we cannot understand the consequences of own speech in a foreign language for the course of social interaction;
- better understanding of own culture and identity.

Through participation in intercultural education people are more familiar with cultural differences and similarities, they know more about other and own culture, they also are more skillful in communicating and respecting each other and they have more positive attitude towards ‘otherness’.

Conclusions

Erasmus Programme supports students international mobility for gaining knowledge and to familiarize with new approaches towards learning and teaching methods. It also enables students to acquire new skills which they will need for
free participation in multicultural European societies. Mobility enriches students' identity and delivers new elements into it. Experience gained during mobility period may interact with students’ current attitudes and values and result in expanding themselves. Period spent abroad not only enriches students’ lives in the academic and professional fields, but can also improve language learning, intercultural skills, self-reliance and self-awareness. Mobility brings students more competences.

If internationalisation in education is a rising social process and phenomenon then we, as teachers and educators have to prepare new curriculums, education strategies and working methods, which will enable to create all necessary competences and cultural attitudes among international students. Through participation in intercultural groups, students are more familiar with cultural differences and similarities, they know more about other and own culture, they are also more skillful in communicating and respecting each other and they have more positive attitude towards ‘otherness’.

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